RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

Moving relationship-rich experiences from the periphery to the center of undergraduate education

Leo Lambert & Peter Felten
relationships matter
our research

interviews & focus groups with 354 individuals

primary research sites:
- Brown University
- Bryn Mawr & Haverford Colleges
- California State University Dominguez Hills
- CUNY - City Tech
- Florida International University
- Hope College
- LaGuardia Community College
- Nevada State College
- Oakton Community College
- Rutgers University - Newark
- Southern New Hampshire University
- University of Iowa
- University of Michigan
- University of Washington

204 undergraduate students

Median age: 23 (range 18-69)

Gender: 67% female, 32% male; 1% non-binary

Race/ethnicity:

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<th>Number</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
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<tr>
<td>114</td>
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<tr>
<td>31</td>
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<td>Asian</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
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“inescapable opportunities” & “relentless welcome”

this is hard

webs of relationships

but worth it
“Belonging and having a sense of mattering is what allows individuals to thrive. We all want to feel connected to someone, to have a place in the world. At community colleges it is especially difficult to create that sense of connection. All of our students are commuter, most of our students are part-time. **So we need to create inescapable opportunities for relationships.**”

Joianne Smith, Oakton Community College
“My research on adult students tells me about the need for **relentless welcome**.”

David Scobey, *Bringing Theory to Practice*

“I believe that success in mentoring, or in any facilitating role in higher education, comes from **a deep down actual place of caring**.”

*Hyun-Soo Seo, University of Michigan*

“Relationships are so powerful in and of themselves, but relationships are strongest where **the structures and the culture** are intended to serve the cause of allowing relationships to happen.”

*Randy Bass, Georgetown University*
“Class time is a prime opportunity for building relationships—for helping students realize that you are a resource for them and that they can come to you and they can trust you.”

_Danette Barber, Nevada State College_
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Danette Barber, Nevada State College

In a 2018 poll of 4,000 people who earned bachelor’s degrees, 79% reported meeting the peer and 60% reported meeting the faculty/staff mentor who had the biggest impact on them during their first year of college.

Lambert, Husser, & Felten, “Mentors Play a Critical Role in Quality of College Experience,” The Conversation (22 August 2018)
“The teachers in our biology department are really interested in active learning and I found that that type of learning really resonated with me. It’s very collaborative working in small groups and having lots of discussion during lecture. I had one professor in genetics the fall quarter of my junior year who dedicated so much time to his students and was really clear about expectations and just was the most phenomenal teacher I ever had. At the very end of the quarter, I just walked up to him after the last lecture and I said, ‘Thank you so much for a great quarter. Are you accepting undergraduate research students?’”

Samantha Paskvan, University of Washington
“An institution needs to commit — I mean whole hog commit — to the importance of mentoring as an institutional cultural priority, and if that then becomes part of the real, lived mission of the institution, then that institution is going to make it a priority in the type of faculty and staff that they hire and promote.”

John Zubizarreta, Columbia College
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<th>&quot;inescapable opportunities&quot; &amp; &quot;relentless welcome&quot;</th>
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Simple, replicable strategies create inescapable opportunities for webs of relationships to develop and thrive.
“New Writing Fellows quickly learn in the first five minutes of a consultation to ask, ‘How are you doing?’ and then to pause and really listen, even if the writer’s response has nothing to do with the writing that provided the exigency for the consultation in the first place. For our program, being a Writing Fellow is about forming a relationship with somebody, if only for one conversation about one paper. It’s just pausing in the chaos of Brown to ask somebody ‘How are you doing?’”

Stacy Kastner, Brown University
“We moved from a prescriptive programming model (RAs need to do X number of programs through the year) to one that helps RAs make authentic connections with students. We give RAs guided conversation topics—Hawk Talks. If an RA can engage new students with questions like, ‘How are classes going? How are you finding the work? How are you doing with note-taking? How is college different from your high school experience? Are you staying on top of everything?’ And the RA has the Ready-Set-Me resources ready to go if the student says, ‘You know, I’m struggling with note-taking.’ It’s just a more natural way to get to the student outcomes we wanted than trying to force it through an educational presentation.”

Greg Thompson, University of Iowa
“What students need and want is a sense of place and a sense of belonging: where’s my place and who are my people?”

*Ed Taylor, Washington*

“I can’t teach you if I don’t know what you know and what you care about.”

*Joel Schlosser, Bryn Mawr College*
“One of the unique aspects of the student technology mentors is that our students start to see faculty and staff as people with the same concerns and learning issues that the rest of us have when learning new technology. It becomes a mutual learning experience for both our peer mentors, in this case our student technology mentors, and the faculty and staff they assist.”

Josephine Corso, LaGuardia Community College
“inescapable opportunities” & “relentless welcome”

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“Students fear failure and being challenged beyond their limits. They may not have been challenged academically in high school and for the first time are really experiencing academic rigor. They fear embarrassing their families—being afraid to come home and say, ‘I am not achieving in college right now. I’m struggling.’ They fear talking to a professor because a professor represents an intimidating authority figure. They are not sure how to approach them. They also resist asking for help or asking for a tutor, because utilizing a tutor is perceived as not being smart. They do not want to go to counseling when they have emotional problems, because that’s for people who are weak. The fear of shame is everywhere.”

David Latimer, City Tech - CUNY
“The general student perception here is that asking for help is not what you want to do.”

Student affairs staff member at research university

“It’s really important to just let them know that just because we’re peer tutors doesn’t mean we’re perfect and that sometimes we also experience imposter syndrome and that’s not irregular.”

Kourtney Dean, Nevada State College
“On the first day of a Gen Chem class of 650 kids, our professor asked, ‘How many of you want to be pre-med?’ Four or five hundred students raised their hands. And then he said, ‘We will get that number down.’”

Undergraduate student at research university
“At this university, there’s such an emphasis on research that I feel that interpersonal relationships with students aren’t valued. So it’s hard to know how much time to invest in something that seems really important to students — and to me.”

Faculty member at research university
“As a faculty member one of the most embarrassing things for me to admit—and I’m very sad to say this—is that for years I did not know that the failure rate was so high in general chemistry. Because I was a junior faculty member I had accepted that this was how it had to be with chemistry.”

_Uma Swamy, Florida International University_
“One thing that’s important not to forget is how effing hard faculty work when they’re not in the classroom. A lot of that is engaging with students, writing letters of recommendation, doing things for students, etc. This relational piece of faculty lives in a lot of cases is a huge part of their work but it’s largely invisible.”

Randy Bass, Georgetown University
“inescapable opportunities” & “relentless welcome”

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“My lab in particular has a strong emphasis on mentorship. Bonny is so careful about that. She makes sure that my voice is validated and that I’m asking questions. She will carve out time to talk about science and to just sit there quietly and ask what I think about something. And then I get to use my science brain.”

*Samantha Paskvan, University of Washington*
“I was super shy when I first came to campus and I did not want to join in anything. I would go to class, sit down, and look as unwelcoming as possible. I didn’t want anyone to sit next to me. Then I took this conversation course and I realized that talking to people who are different from me is not so scary, but it’s really fun and interesting and you can learn so much from people.”

Alexa Oleson, University of Iowa
“Many of our students haven’t necessarily tapped into the gifts and the skills they already have—their own tenacity, their own intelligence. We help them understand that they are fully capable—every single one of them—of earning their degrees. We ask: ‘What are the things that you’ve worked towards and achieved?’ Whether it’s being a great parent, being a productive member of your family, enjoying some subject in school that really resonated with you, or something else that helps them identify the strengths in themselves. That is essential to them being able to say and believe, ‘I am good at things, I can commit to things, and I can finish them.’”

Donna Linderman, ASAP - CUNY
“I have a big headline and that is that the Gateway project has improved student success. Thousands more students are passing their Gateway courses, and when that happens they are more likely to graduate and their lives are changed. And their families are changed and our communities are changed. So I think that the biggest takeaway of the whole thing is that the impact of this work is enormous.”

Tekla Nicholas, Florida International University
“We are transforming the lives that will transform America.”

Thomas Parham, California State University Dominguez Hills
What are the barriers and challenges – and the assets and opportunities – for relationship-rich education in your context?

What questions, comments, and suggestions do you have?
Leo Lambert, lambert@elon.edu

Peter Felten, pfelten@elon.edu