

Relationship-Rich Education

by Kyle Gipson

Sent: Thursday, March 11, 2021

It has been stated through decades of research that the most unique factor that makes for an excellent college education pertains to human relationships. Human relationships are at the center of what has been called “relationship-rich education.” Peter Felten and Leo Lambert, in their book [*Relationship-Rich Education: How Human Connections Drive Success in College \(2020\)*](#), share how a relationship-rich education encompasses intentional practices throughout an institution that place a premium on cultivating relationships, especially within academics. The transformative potential and the lasting legacies of relationship-rich college experiences have been shown to be very important to the maturation process of first-generation students and students who represent historically marginalized populations to graduation as well as reducing DFW rates.

Why use “relationship-rich education”?

Relationships matter. For student outcomes, relationships with faculty, staff, and peers are major influences that have a positive or negative impact on individuals in higher education in their progress toward graduation. Peer relationships are often more important than faculty-student or staff-student relationships. As lead-learners ourselves, we can utilize our own inquiry into what we could do at the micro-level, our classrooms or laboratories, to take inventory of what we are doing as it relates to relationship-rich educational experiences:

- How do I and the participants of my course become a “community”?
- How do I build up enough of a relationship with my students where we all can share our authentic selves to facilitate learning?
- How do I model being a lead-learner and how do I invite students as partners in the learning enterprise?

How could “relationship-rich education” apply in my practice?

Key to the learning enterprise is intentionality and explaining that relationships are meaningful, not just between the student and the content or interactions with the professors, but more importantly with interpersonal relationships with fellow classmates. One of the most important things that happens to our students while they are with us in college is that they build a set of relationships that will be important to them for the rest of their lives. Some of these relationships will be for a reason, season, or a lifetime, but, at any duration, they will be hugely impactful.

Engaging in this endeavor, we should be mindful that relationships are high stakes for our students, before, during and after college. We have the opportunity to guide our students in building a mindset and an agency for them to own the curation of their constellation and web of diverse mentors. As lead-learners, we can begin this process by seeding the exploration through inquiry about how our students might find mentors among their peers. Our approach should be explicit in explaining that having mentors helps not only in college, but even after college in a variety of ways.

The following are questions that have been asked of relationship-rich education and some of the answers can be found within the resource material below:

- How might we create space in our classrooms for our students to make meaningful educational connections with their peers?
- How might we be available to be a “mentor for a moment”?
- How do I add these opportunities of fostering relationships in the classroom for students when there is some much content to cover?
- How do I add these opportunities of fostering relationships in the classroom for students when the number is greater than 25 and possibly over 100?

Where can I find out more?

- [“Relationship-Rich Education” \(Teaching in Higher Ed podcast, episode 331\), with Peter Felten and Leo Lambert](#)
- [Relationship-Rich Education: How Human Connections Drive Success in College, by Peter Felten and Leo M. Lambert](#)
- [The Undergraduate Experience: Focusing Institutions on What Matters Most, by Peter Felten and Leo M. Lambert](#)
- [“What’s in a Name? The Importance of Students Perceiving That an Instructor Knows Their Names in a High-Enrollment Biology Classroom,” by Katelyn M. Cooper, Brian Haney, Anna Krieg, and Sara E. Brownell](#)
- [“Caution, Student Experience May Vary: Social Identities Impact a Student’s Experience in Peer Discussions,” by Sarah L. Eddy, Sara E. Brownell, Phonraphee Thummaphan, Ming-Chih Lan, and Mary Pat Wenderoth](#)
- [“Faculty Leadership and Student Persistence—A Story From Oakton Community College,” by Elisabeth Barnett](#)

About the author: Kyle Gipson is an associate professor in Engineering and a faculty associate in the teaching area of the Center for Faculty Innovation. He can be reached at gipsonkq@jmu.edu.

To offer feedback about this Toolbox or any others, feel free to use [this anonymous Google form](#) or contact Emily Gravett (graveteo@jmu.edu) directly. For additional information about the CFI’s Teaching Toolboxes, including PDFs of past emails, please visit: <https://www.jmu.edu/cfi/teaching/other/teaching-toolbox.shtml>.
