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The Undergraduate Experience: Focusing Institutions On What Matters Most (Book Review)

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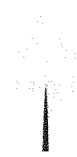
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*The Undergraduate Experience:
Focusing Institutions On What Matters Most*

P. Felten, J. Gardner,
C. Schroeder, L. Lambert, and B. Barefoot;
San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 2016

Reviewed by David M. Johnstone

106 In a culture that frequently voices skepticism about the value and viability of higher education, the authors of the “The Undergraduate Experience” seek to provide an alternate voice. Using current models, the authors reflect on the commitments common to universities that are effectively educating their students. In describing their intent, the foreword states, “For leaders who find themselves discouraged because of external constituents and forces, the authors argue that the focus must be on controlling the things we have power to control” (p. viii). The well-written volume exclusively focuses on the undergraduate experience, providing models of current programs for the reader to consider.

The foreword notes, “One size fits all strategies for learning seldom work,” (p. ix) yet there are common “principles of learning” (p. ix) that help “meet the needs of all students” (p. ix). Further, “One essential characteristic of a healthy institution is the extent to which the climate encourages transparency and honest dialogue” (p. x). This is the desire of the authors for the book—that it be a primer for discussion about an institution’s priorities. The authors identify that “in many places higher education is

flourishing” (p. 1). In their studies, conversations, and assessments, they observe trends and commitments present within flourishing programs and institutions. The authors believe they have identified a “common set of commitments to what matters most in the undergraduate experience” (p. 5).

The authors comment: “We are emphasizing possibilities not because we are wearing rose-colored glasses, but rather because we have seen countless examples across the country of institutional and programmatic excellence” (p. 13). They note effective programs shared similar commitments. These schools, in their own way, believed that “the preeminent purpose of undergraduate education is student learning” (p. 5). While one would assume this commitment is self-evident, flourishing institutions clearly articulate learning as a value and priority. While a university’s “curriculum clearly is essential to the undergraduate experience . . . too often colleges are reluctant to recognize and validate the important learning that takes place beyond the classroom” (p. 26). The authors recognize that learning takes place in a variety of ways, in multiple locations, and with diverse individuals. Students need to be able to interact “with faculty and peers about substantive matters” (p. 23). Out of classroom experiences need to have the possibility of becoming significant and challenging by promoting “experience with diversity, wherein students are exposed to and must contend with people and circumstances that differ from those with which students are familiar” (p. 23). These occasions need to provide spaces for “structured opportunities to reflect and integrate learning” (p. 23). All of this aids students in integrating learning into their lives.

Dovetailing with emphases on learning is the recognition of relationships on students’ educations. While classroom content is important, relational connections solidify learning and broaden students’ experiences.

Institutions that are effective in delivering a robust education have leadership with “high expectations,” which are central to the university (p. 6). The authors observed, “Expectations are based on purpose, values, and personal beliefs at both the individual and institutional levels” (p. 72). Along with this clarity of expectations, effective universities have a commitment to “align their resources, policies, and practices with their educational purposes and student characteristics” (p. 6). However, they do not solely rely on aligning their resources with their mission. These institutions continuously examine whether or not they are accomplishing their intent and how to keep improving: “Excellent institutions critically

assess student progress and their own effectiveness” (p. 7). Further, effective universities have leaders who “share a sense of vision and purpose” (p. 7). This involves leadership throughout an institution, where each area “bears responsibility for the culture of leadership in an institution” (p. 149). Everyone helps shape the culture of the university.

While the book is wide-ranging and provides numerous models and principles, for the purposes of this review, I want to focus on institutional commitments to relationships. The authors note, “Student-faculty, student-staff, and student-student relationships are essential to the undergraduate experience” (p. 5). For educators and practitioners committed to student life, this assertion is a truism. While there are some studies that demonstrate the connection of relationships to academic success or grades, research more often demonstrates that relationships affect a student’s resilience, endurance, tenacity, and curiosity. Most institutions of higher education provide solid content, but the successful graduate also learns the soft skills needed for success.

The authors assert that institutions need to discern how to “make relationships central to learning” (p. 47). They observe,

If students had a professor who (a) cared about them as individuals, (b) made them excited about learning, and (c) encouraged them to pursue their dreams, then – years later – their odds of being engaged at work more than doubled, as did their odds of reporting higher overall well-being. (p. 52)

Because “belonging is vital to student learning and success,” the impact of relationships cannot be understated (p. 56). Further, “what we do know is that relationships matter in part because they help students to learn and to feel that they belong in college” (p. 58). Strategically, the authors’ desire to encourage institutions to recognize that “every person on a college campus has the potential to be a teacher and mentor” (p. 59). In challenging institutional expectations, they comment: “At many colleges and universities, faculty efforts toward relationship building do not fit neatly into one of the traditional categories of teaching, scholarship, and service” (p. 61). They suggest, “Higher education could indeed be substantially improved if we paid more attention to the importance and quality of mentoring and relationships in undergraduate education” (p. 64). The authors ask the question, “How does your institution create structures, environments, and programs to encourage meaningful relationships?” (p. 65). Acknowledging the impact of relationships on

a student’s educational success has implications for the systems and structures of universities.

At the beginning of the volume, the authors state their intent: “This book aims to help you articulate and enact a concrete, aspirational vision for undergraduate education that will have a positive impact on your students, your institution, and our world” (p. 14). The volume does not presume to be a roadmap or a strategy for success. Rather, the authors challenge the reader to go beyond the standard rubrics for success. Many colleges and universities use admission, retention, and graduation rates as their standard metrics. The authors observe, “Focusing on retention as a primary metric is an insufficient aspiration. Retention can be more accurately viewed as a by-product of what matters much more – student learning and success” (p. 171).

They suggest the undergraduate experience is another route to assess and focus resources and attention. The authors assert, “The greatest influences on students during their undergraduate years are other students. We must pay greater attention to how we can effectively encourage and structure the kinds of student interaction that will enhance learning” (p. 173). That academics and high-level university administrators wrote this comment caught me off guard—the academic world does not tend to recognize the role of relationships. The intent of this volume is to be a catalyst for conversation in academic and university worlds. In a national environment of skepticism and cynicism over the value of higher education, this volume may be a significant primer for critical conversations at many institutions. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

David M. Johnstone is the Associate Dean of Students at George Fox University.