

Making College “Worth It” – Season 1, Episode 2

Making Connections in College

Sydni Brown (00:11):

Welcome to Making College Worth It, the show that examines engaged learning activities that increase the value of college experiences.

Jessie Moore (00:18):

In each episode, we share research from Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning and their international network of scholars. We explore engaged learning activities that recent college graduates associate with their financial and time commitment to college being worthwhile.

Sydni Brown (00:32):

I'm Sydni Brown, a rising senior majoring in communications design of strategic communications with minors in poverty and social justice and leadership study at Elon University.

Jessie Moore (00:43):

And I'm Jessie Moore, director of Elon's Center for Engaged Learning and a professor of professional writing and rhetoric.

Sydni Brown (00:49):

In this episode, we'll focus on making connections in college and explore how students can build meaningful relationships with peers, staff, and faculty. We'll talk to Isis Artze-Vega, Peter Felten, and Oscar Miranda Tapia, three of the authors of the new book Connections are Everything. Their book is written for students and you can read it for free, so we'll include a link in our show notes.

Jessie Moore (01:13):

In a 2021 survey conducted by the Elon University poll in the Center for Engaged Learning, 54.5% of recent college graduates indicated that they'd encountered meaningful relationships with faculty or staff multiple times, and 69.1% reported multiple meaningful relationships with other students. Unfortunately, 16.4% reported never developing those relationships with faculty or staff, and 9.8% never developed meaningful relationships with peers.

(01:43):

Over 70% of the survey participants indicated that the educational relationships they developed with peers, faculty, and staff were very important or extremely important to their success in college. In the same survey, we also learned that 61.9% of recent graduates consider connecting with people from different cultural backgrounds as very important to their day-to-day life. But 29.2% reported that they didn't develop that skill in college.

(02:12):

Our guests have explored the importance of college relationships in more detail, drawing on interviews with approximately 450 students, faculty, and staff from over 30 colleges and universities. They also share strategies from making connections in college. Let's hear from our panelists.

Isis Artze-Vega (02:52):

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My name is Isis Artze-Vega, and I get to serve as College Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Valencia College in Central Florida. And I, like many individuals, was really moved by Relationship-Rich Education, the book when it was released, and part of what really stood out to me from Peter and Leo's work there was this elevating of something that is really well-established.

(03:26):

The idea that relationships are important, it's not a brand new idea, but how they elevated that idea and made it more comprehensive and painted a picture of what it looks like when education is relationship rich and made it feel important and accessible and doable. That was the beginning of my interest in this topic.

Oscar Miranda Tapia (03:50):

My name is Oscar Miranda Tapia. I'm a current PhD student in the Educational Leadership Policy and Human Development Department at NC State. I'm specifically focused on studying higher education, opportunity, equity, and justice. That's my concentration. Relationships have really been one of the main drivers of my success. Had it not been for relationships that I was able to develop in college, I don't know that I would be where I am today.

(04:23):

It was the many people along my journey, my educational journey, that saw things in me that I didn't know that I was capable of or that I could accomplish. Those people were mentors, coaches, teachers, professors, all of these people poured their time, their mentorship and their love and support along the way. Those people I have the world to thank. They were the ones that connected me with different opportunities across college campuses, whether that was internship opportunities, fellowship opportunities, job opportunities even.

(05:04):

It's those same mentors that also wrote my letters of recommendation for grad school. Relationships by far have been the key to my success, and I want other students to also know about the importance of relationships so that they too can seek out that mentorship and live an awesome life, a successful life, a happy life. I want that for other students as well.

Peter Felten (05:31):

Hi, everybody. I'm Peter Felten. I am with the Center for Engaged Learning in the Provost Office and the Department of History and Geography at Elon. I've been thinking about relationships and education for a long time. Like Oscar was saying, I've benefited immensely from relationships in my own education, especially I think when people saw things in me that I didn't notice myself. They encouraged or pushed or challenged sometimes in ways that were really powerful.

(06:03):

I've been studying higher ed for quite a while too, and the book that we're talking about today grew out of actually two other books that Leo Lambert and I did. The key one is Relationship-Rich Education, which we published in 2020, Which Really invited faculty and staff and institutions to think about what happens if we centered relationships in our work with students. That work was fun to do and fascinating to do. I learned a ton from doing it. In those interviews and in those conversations and after the book was published, Leo and I and lots of people we had talked with kept saying, it's great.

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It's essential that faculty and staff and institutions think about what they can do to support these kinds of relationships. But we also need to help students understand that they have agency, they have capacity to build these kinds of relationships. This new book that we're talking about today is really meant to be an invitation to students to think about what can you do to support your own education and that of your peers by building really powerful relationships, just the kind that Oscar and I and others have benefited from.

Sydni Brown (07:16):

Thank you so much for introducing yourselves. You touched on this a little bit, Peter, about your preparing to write Relationship-Rich Education and you interviewed almost 400 students, professors, and staff. Could you talk some more about some of the key takeaways you took from those interviews specifically and how that developed into the writing of Connections are Everything?

Peter Felten (07:38):

Sure, Sydni. We did interviews for Relationship-Rich Education in person back when you can fly around in 2019. Being in the same room with students and faculty and staff was really powerful in seeing their space and hearing their stories. And then Leo and I used those stories and we connected them to the research on higher education. What we tried to do was come to some broad principles. What do we know about relationships? What do relationships do for students? Why are they so important? In Relationship-Rich Education, we have four of these core principles.

(08:16):

One is that what students need, all students need, and that relationships can provide is a really foundational sense of welcome and care that allows students to thrive, to learn, to grow, to take risks in higher education. The second thing we learned is how important relationships are for motivating students to learn and to challenge themselves. Sometimes people will think, oh, relationships are soft and relationships don't really do more than encourage.

(08:48):

What we heard in the interviews, what the research says is students over and over in all sorts of different institutions saying, "I'll work a lot harder for someone who knows me, someone who challenges me, someone who pushes me, someone I don't want to disappoint." Relationships drive student motivation. Classrooms are absolutely key for that. A third thing we learned, again, echoing research, is that what students need is not one connection, they need whole networks or constellations of powerful relationships. That's what really supports and challenge them the best.

(09:21):

And then last but not least, so much of higher education right now is transactional. You try to get in. You try to get through. You try to get good grades. You try to graduate and get a job. All those transactions are important, but what students told us in these interviews was how important relationships were for turning college from a series of transactions into something much more meaningful and much more transformational, a chance for students to make some meaning about questions like, who am I and who am I becoming, and for whom am I doing all this?

(09:56):

That's what we learned in Relationship-Rich Education or some of what we learned in doing that work. And after that, Leo and I were talking with each other and then with our colleagues and friends, Oscar

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and Isis, about this work, and we kept thinking and talking about how students, and especially the research suggests first generation students, don't necessarily understand the importance of relationships in undergraduate education. They don't necessarily value that.

(10:29):

We thought, what if we could write a book that builds on what we did in Relationship-Rich Education that helps those students understand that relationships matter for them, that there are things they can do that are within their control. Even if they're an introvert, even if they don't have very much time, even if they're not sure about this whole higher ed thing, there's things they can do that can make their own education and their peers' education much more powerful.

(10:55):

Oscar and Isis and Leo and I did a bunch of interviews on Zoom in 2021 and early 2022 this time just with students to try to get even more student stories from more places around the country and recognizing that the world had changed in substantial ways between 2019 and 2021 and 2022 when we were writing. We wanted to get a sense of how COVID and Black Lives Matter protests and elections and everything else had really affected students.

Jessie Moore (11:26):

Thank you, Peter. If you could pick thinking about Connections are Everything, if you could pick one key takeaway, what would you most like college students and the people who support them to know about developing connections in college?

Isis Artze-Vega (11:41):

If I could isolate one takeaway, I would say making connections in college is worth it. There are so many competing demands for students' time, and I worry that cultivating relationships in the ways that we describe and suggest could seem nice but not essential. I would really challenge that some would say that being connected to others is a prerequisite to learning. That until we feel connected and safe, that we cannot learn. We have a loneliness epidemic, and so we all really do need to be connected to one another.

(12:21):

We learn more when we're working with others, with peers. The individuals on our campuses can be invaluable thought partners, mentor, supporters, advocates. There are so many reasons that we demystify it, that we demystify in the book, and that students told us that relationships made such a difference for them. I hope that if there's one takeaway, it's like, okay, I'm convinced this is worth my while. I might take these people up on one or two of their suggestions.

Oscar Miranda Tapia (12:51):

For students, it begins with a bold first step. It really just sending that first email to a professor or a staff member, just introducing yourself. You could also go into a classroom early before class starts and just introduce yourself to the professor there. Maybe you take a visit to an identity center on campus that you just hang out. Maybe you talk to some staff members there. That brave first step is crucial. You never know what may happen or come from that first brave step.

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I say brave because it's not always easy. It can be challenging at times. It can be intimidating at times. It can be scary as well, but people on campus are there to support you. They care about you. They want you to succeed. While it may be scary and challenging at times, people on campus, the faculty, the staff members there, they want to be able to connect with people. I believe that it's in human nature for us to be interconnected, to be connected with one another. Yes, talking about class content and talking about trying to acquire a job and internships and all these things are important.

(14:13):

But at the end of the day, we need to be able to sit down and just be able to have a conversation with one another, get to know about each other's lives, each other's families, what we like and don't like. It's through these relationships that will enhance everything else, learning in class, like Peter said, overall success in college and even after college, life after college. Just take that first step, reaching out email, visiting a center, talking to someone.

(14:47):

Maybe you know someone that knows someone else and talking to that first person, asking them to introduce you to that next person is a way to go about it as well. You don't have to do this alone either. You can take a classmate, a peer, and do this together. Faculty are there to support. Staff are there to support. We are here to serve students. That's our primary focus. I wish that more and more students would know that and feel comfortable with that, but it starts just with a first step.

Peter Felten (15:21):

I don't suppose it's illegal for me just to say what he said. One thing I would hope students and other people who read this book recognize is how important student peer connections are for student success. I think sometimes students come to college or students are in college and they think the professors are the ones with all the knowledge, so I have to connect only with them, or staff know how this place work, and so I need to connect with them. Professors and staff and lots of people are really powerful.

(15:52):

Sometimes students though I think don't value how much their peers can support them and can be really crucial in their success. We dug into the research on this, and one thing we found that I think might be helpful for students to recognize and others to recognize is there's three things student peer relationships can do for students. One is intellectual connection and intellectual support. You can study together and things like this.

(16:21):

But there's two other things sometimes we don't think about, which is emotional support, which can be having fun together, can be working through stressful moments and things like this, and then instrumental things, practical things like where do you study, how did you get that job on campus, I don't know how to find the writing center, all those sorts of practical things. Peers can do different things for you.

(16:47):

If you're thinking about your peers, what kind of relationships do you have with one or two of them? Is it really just in the fun section? And then like, well, maybe we could study together and think about connecting those. Because what the research says is the students who are happiest and the students

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who maintain their peer connections even after college tend to have peer connections that have all three of those components to them.

(17:13):

Yes, they're fun, or yes, they're emotional support, and yes, they include practical support, but they also include some of the intellectual work. How do you build friendships like that because those peer friendships are going to help you in college and they're the ones that are going to carry forward often after college.

Sydni Brown (17:29):

Yeah, thank you guys so much for all of those good answers and advice. I'll definitely take that with me as I continue through my last year. It's very interesting to think about where I started and where I'm now as far as the connections that I've made and just how much support that I've gotten from the faculty and staff in making those connections.

(17:49):

It's very interesting to hear about all the research that goes into that. Going back into the book, early on in the book, you guys offer a few examples of a first relationship that helped ground the student's experience. What can students do if they haven't made that first connection yet?

Peter Felten (18:04):

First thing I do, Sydni, is not stress out. I mean, we heard this in our interviews. We know this from our own experiences. Sometimes you get into a new environment and you connect with people right away. Sometimes it's a real struggle. Don't allow the fact that maybe you don't have the connections you want yet to be a barrier for you to connect. Don't let that paralyze you. First, recognize that's totally common.

(18:35):

The key thing to do, I think, is to really be deliberate about saying, "Okay, today I'm going to try to connect with one person. Today I'm going to go to class a little early and chat with someone, or today I'm going to go to office hours, or today I'm going to go to an identity center or a club or something on campus," and just try to make one connection. Don't let this idea that connections are everything become an overwhelming barrier.

(19:01):

It's like, oh, no, I don't have any, so therefore I'm failing. It's like no, connections get built most things in life, one step at a time. What's one step you can take today? It might work, it might not, but I think and our research suggests that if you are deliberate and intentional, step-by-step, you'll get there.

Isis Artze-Vega (19:21):

We heard from students that it took a couple of years. They had some connections, but those meaningful ones that made the biggest difference for them didn't come until a little bit later. That would be one important point that I would want to share. The second one would be that it doesn't have to take any big... You don't have to take any big steps to make it happen. If you are in an in-person class, then you might get there a little early and ask someone a question.

(19:50):

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If there's an upcoming exam, you might ask someone if they'd be willing to get together to review. Little things. I think we tried really hard at the end of each part of the book to say, try this. We really, really pushed ourselves to make sure that we were not asking a lot of students, that it would be a fairly straightforward step that you could take going to places where students tend to congregate. In an online setting, we acknowledge it can be a little bit trickier.

(20:22):

That's something that I would want our readers or potential readers to know also that we thought about what are those opportunities in an online setting to engage. So many faculty, for example, now offer the version of office hours that is via Zoom or another platform. Go there. We've provided some suggestions on what to do in an office hour setting. I hope that there are enough examples that seem really accessible and doable that a reader, even a hesitant one, would find something that they could say, "Okay, I might try that. That seems like a reasonable step for me to take."

Oscar Miranda Tapia (21:03):

Inventory of some of the connections that you've had maybe even before college. Just because we transition into the college space does not mean that we just have just forgotten or let go of those relationships. We've spent a larger part of our time maybe in some of those relationships than we even have in college. Don't forget about those meaningful relationships that you've had up until that point. You never know the kinds of support that they can still provide. Stay connected with them.

(21:39):

Don't forget about them. These folks can be even your family members, community members, folks that wrote your letters of recommendation, teachers back in high school or middle school even if you're really connected and stay in touch. Don't feel like you're not already connected because I would challenge the idea that you're not. Like I said before, as human beings we're pretty connected and we're pretty interconnected. There's got to be some connections that you've been able to establish in the past.

(22:13):

Something that you may want to try is reaching back out to some of those connections, trying to brainstorm some ways as to how you can further your connections, your constellation of relationships. Something else that I mentioned earlier was not having to do this alone. If there is a peer on campus that maybe you see or you notice that is pretty connected, you're not as intimidated reaching out to them, connecting with them, staying after class and having a conversation with them, ask them, how did you go about establishing that connection with that professor?

(22:55):

How did you get that internship position at the office on campus? Who did you talk to? Who are some folks that are in your corner backing you up? How did you go about establishing those connections? Is there an opportunity perhaps where you can connect me or make an introduction to that one staff member or faculty member? These are all steps that you can take to begin to develop an even fuller and even bigger constellation of relationships. There's people around you that have done it.

(23:33):

There's people around you that want to help you connect. Utilize those relationships that you already have. One of the things that I often tell students is their connections could be your connections as well.

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Whatever your connections are can be their connections as well. It's a give or take. Utilize some of those resources, some of the people that you already have in your corner.

Jessie Moore (23:53):

Oscar, I also am grateful that she remind us that students bring relationships with them, that they're not magically starting over when they come to college, but that the relationships they've already formed are still important to their college experience.

Sydni Brown (24:09):

I think we've touched on it a little bit. I think in the book, again, you challenge students to take the initiative to connect, and sometimes it takes a great deal of bravery to take that initiative and to make that first move. Do you have any tips on how to work through those fears and anxieties when it comes to making the first move?

Isis Artze-Vega (24:28):

It's such a great question and I would never want to minimize the fear and the anxiety that can be elicited. For some of us it may be easier and for others it is that much harder. I would say to keep looking for a step or a suggestion that does seem doable to you. You might say, "Oh, at the end of chapter one, they make these suggestions, but those sound very scary or they create a lot of angst in me." I would say ignore us. Don't do those things. They clearly don't work for you. Keep reading and read another student's story.

(25:03):

Hear how someone else initiated their connections. Maybe something that they did seems more accessible or doable. And then of course, as we do in the book, I would say if the levels of anxiety or angst are such that you cannot function effectively as a college student, then please reach out to the services on your campus because those feelings are real. I want to validate them, and I want to remind us that one of the great things that we have at most colleges and universities is access to resources and to professionals.

(25:35):

We would never take the place of that. We would never minimize it. If something seems doable, try it. And if you would want some expert help, please seek that out.

Sydni Brown (25:45):

Thank you. I appreciate the acknowledgement that those feelings are very real. It can be very hard for somebody coming into college where it feels like everybody's doing everything at once and to feel like you're falling behind. I can understand how that feels. I can understand how other people feel that way. But there really are so many resources and just making that connection and being able to have somebody help is a really good first step.

Isis Artze-Vega (26:09):

Yeah, I hope so.

Jessie Moore (26:11):

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In Connections are Everything, you mentioned relationship accelerators. Can you tell us a little bit about what those are and why they're important?

Peter Felten (26:20):

We started using this concept of relationship accelerators because as we were looking at the research on higher education and especially things, Jessie, like your research on the conditions that foster really engage meaningful learning and recognizing that we could give students a list of high impact practices or something like this, but that list isn't really comprehensive from a student perspective. Things like employment aren't on there. There's lots of powerful things on there.

(26:53):

Also, if we used some of the higher ed terms, we'd have to explain what those are. We hope the beauty of the concept of relationship accelerators is it says what it does. Relationship accelerators do other things too, right? Undergraduate research is a great example of a relationship accelerator because it really connects a student with a professor, sometimes with other peers in a research setting, in ways that are powerful intellectually and also emotionally and in other ways often.

(27:29):

Saying an experience is a relationship accelerator isn't saying that's the only thing it does, but all these diverse things, including being a leader in a student club or really being on a sports team, all of those things are really relationship accelerators. We thought having students have that frame in mind that part of what this experience is doing for me is deepening and accelerating these relationships that might develop otherwise is a helpful way for students to approach a lot of the experiences that are in the curriculum or outside the curriculum in their college experience.

Isis Artze-Vega (28:08):

We invented this construct or this term at minimum, so I want to be fully transparent about that. We had this feeling and this hunch from our personal experiences and from the student stories that there are some activities and some forms of engagement like undergraduate research and service learning that we have seen help to accelerate or to boost relationships. We thought what a great opportunity to recast them. In other settings, parents or students might hear from a college, "Here are these great high impact practices. The research says they're good and you should do them."

(28:50):

Here we're saying, yes, all of that is true and they can also be really helpful for you in fast tracking your relationships. You might have a built-in mentor or a built-in community. We heard that from students. We know it from our own experiences, and we wanted our readers to know that there's really a lot to get out of what are commonly known as high impact practices. In the context of this book, we really do think that they accelerate relationships.

Jessie Moore (29:19):

I really like that renaming of them and also the inclusiveness of it because there's so many things that aren't on the official list of high impact practices that can serve as relationship accelerators and that share many of the same traits. Opening up the space to talk about activities in that way I think is really valuable.

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Isis Artze-Vega (29:41):

Thanks, Jessie. The one thing I would add that we might not typically think of as an accelerator, in the book itself, we might even feature it somewhere else, but employment. Student employment and having a supervisor who works full-time on a college or university campus or at a college or university can be such a powerful experience for students.

(30:06):

Someone could think to themselves, oh, I can't engage in this high impact practice like undergraduate research because I have to work. I was one of those students. Not realizing that the opportunity to work and to work at a college or university can be a really great way to connect to people who know a lot and who care so deeply about your success.

Jessie Moore (30:29):

Absolutely. I really appreciate you highlighting that space as well.

Sydni Brown (30:33):

I think that's very real. As a first generation college student, it's something that is always on my mind. It's like I have to be able to work to support myself and help my family support me in this journey. It is definitely an interesting thing. When I think about all the jobs that I've had have all been on campus. That's where I made the most connections really is through my work.

(30:54):

I feel like I know my professors and the people around me and even outside of my class, I feel like I make the most connections through those experiences and being able to put the two together has been really beneficial. It's just nice to hear somebody talk about it.

Oscar Miranda Tapia (31:08):

It's through those interactions that not only are you getting feedback about your performance on jobs and job responsibilities, but you're also having some time through those conversations to be able to connect just about things outside the job. A simple conversation of how are you can lead to many other conversations or topics that come out of that conversation because some of these activities oftentimes happen pretty frequently.

(31:45):

You're likely to develop a stronger relationship over time. It's these relationships that you really want to hopefully try to seek out because they can be so helpful for you in your college journey and life after college as well.

Sydni Brown (32:02):

What can colleges and their faculty and staff do to help students make connections?

Isis Artze-Vega (32:07):

It's such an important question because we don't want students and their families to read this book, Connections are Everything, and to think this is on us entirely. This is our responsibility on top of all of the other responsibilities we have as students to be successful. You want me to do this other thing? I

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want to appreciate that we see it as a shared responsibility. The Relationship-Rich Education was written primarily for higher ed audiences, for faculty, for staff, or administrators to say relationships matter deeply and there are so many things you can do.

(32:45):

Listen to the kinds of things colleges and universities and your colleagues are doing from across the country. That was the starting point was not students. It was to say to leaders, this makes an enormous difference and look at all of the ways that you can cultivate Relationship-Rich Education, including in the classroom. And then Connections are Everything says, okay, and students can be agents of their own success too, as we know, and so let's empower them.

(33:14):

When students use their agency and we create the best conditions, now we can truly cultivate that relationship-rich ecosystem and culture. But to answer your question more specifically, we have an opportunity in teaching, for example, to help students make connections in that smaller climate and community of our classroom. Part of the intimidation we talked about earlier comes with size. There are so many people and so many places, but in a classroom, it's almost can be a built-in community.

(33:47):

We talk about group work and thoughtful group work and the benefits to learning, but that can also be really important in helping students to connect to their peers in their class, especially those of us who get to teach students early in their college experience or their first couple of classes where they're making those connections for the first time. Then I think institutions can do everything from reading Relationship-Rich Education, which many have done to bring awareness to their colleagues on like, wow, this is something we can do.

(34:23):

It's something that can make a difference, and that it isn't a big heavy lift if we each do our part and we each connect and pay attention to and listen to one student at a time. There are a lot of us who work here, and I think that this is one of the differentiators of Relationship-Rich Education. It isn't an expensive strategic investment with a technology tool that costs millions of dollars.

(34:48):

It's reminding us that before we are professionals, before we are students, we are human beings and we are wired to be connected to one another, and that we benefit as much from those relationships that we cultivate as students do. It's a mutually beneficial process, and again, there's only great gain to be had from doing so.

Peter Felten (35:15):

I'll share two ways that faculty and staff can help students build these connections. First is talk with students about the value of relationships. That might be telling stories from your own experience as a student. It might be talking about your own experience as a faculty member, what you see with students, what you see in the program you run as a staff member with students so that we demystify some of this for students because students sometimes don't know or don't believe that relationships matter.

(35:47):

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One is we have to do that. And then second, we should use our courses, we should use our programs, we should use the work we do with students in ways that helps students connect with each other in meaningful ways. I can design my course that way, and not just the first day where we all learn each other's names or we do some sort of icebreaker, but relentlessly and throughout the course of the semester. One faculty member I interviewed for a different project, she's a professor at Carleton University in Ottawa, in Canada.

(36:22):

She teaches a thousand students at a time in Intro to Biology, and she says since COVID, one of the things she has listed on her syllabus is that making a friend is one of the learning objectives in her course. She says it's not just because friends matter in the long-term. She says the research is so clear and she sees it every semester, friends help each other through the stressful moments of Intro to Biology. Friends study together, friends support each other, and friends like biology because you're both taking it together.

(36:55):

Friends helps so much. She says she puts it on her syllabus and she talks to her students about it regularly, and then she tries to have opportunities for students to interact in various really purposeful ways, not just getting to know you, but doing active learning things, but with different students who sit around them in this huge room, so that over time students are making a bunch of connections in her class. She says you don't need to report at the end you've got a friend, so you get an A.

(37:24):

She just wants students to know that part of her purpose in teaching this course is to help students connect with the kind of people who are going to be peers in college and maybe professional colleagues or friends for much longer.

Oscar Miranda Tapia (37:39):

I really want to second what Peter said about the relentless pursuit to connect with students. During my time working as a staff member on a college campus, there were times when I would reach out to students and try to connect with them, but sometimes you wouldn't hear from them. I'm sure they have many other things going on in their lives. That doesn't mean that you can't continue to reach out to them, to let them know that you're still thinking about them, that you care about them.

(38:08):

In that time when you send that email or you let them know you're thinking about them, they may respond back. It's that moment that is so critical, so pivotal. That could really jumpstart that relationship between that staff or faculty member with that student. Letting them know that you care about them, not just as students, but as human beings, that you care about their success, that you want to connect with them, not just about class content, but just who they are as humans.

(38:41):

Another strategy that faculty or staff can develop is trying to meet students maybe for coffee or lunch on campus, off campus. I find that oftentimes it just allows students, especially first generation college students, to see that faculty or staff member in a different setting, a different light, a different role that can maybe break or take down some of those barriers that maybe intimidating.

Sydni Brown (39:12):

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That's what I always find too is that I tend to absorb the most information or pay the most attention or get the most out of the class where the teacher is really making a strong effort to have a connection with their students. It doesn't feel like earlier you're talking about a transaction. It feels like an experience. It makes me excited to go to class. I had an experience like that this past semester where it was really like she really just cared about how we were doing, and she just really wanted to know us.

(39:40):

At times, we barely even got through some of the content because we just were talking about all of our lives and just everything that was going on. That's something that was really stuck with me and something that I really appreciate. But as we come to the end of our podcasting session, again, thank you guys so much, is there anything else you'd like our audience to know about making connections in college just in general?

Isis Artze-Vega (40:01):

I would want your audience to know that the decision to make it freely available and that we were really grateful to the Gardner Institute for making that possible is because we want it to be useful and practical, and we want to make sure that anyone who thinks that anyone they know in their circle could benefit from it can say, "Here's a link." I would want everyone to know that this isn't a gimmick.

(40:30):

We feel really strongly that the ideas and the stories will inspire and will be helpful and will make you make the most of that college experience, a once in a lifetime opportunity for many of us. Please spread the word. Share it. There's no need to read it start to finish. Take the parts that work for you and ignore the rest. That's fine. We just want to be helpful.

Sydni Brown (40:53):

Thank you so much for all the insightful answers. It's very interesting to hear this from so many different types of people from so many different backgrounds. Thank you.

Isis Artze-Vega (41:02):

Awesome. I love it. I love it.

Jessie Moore (41:04):

Yeah, thank you. I did so many wonderful suggestions there and tips and strategies for students and for the people who care about them. It gives us a lot to think about. Thank you for making time for this.

Isis Artze-Vega (41:16):

Of course.

Peter Felten (41:17):

Thank you both.

Jessie Moore (41:17):

Thank you so much.

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Sydni Brown (41:18):

Nice to meet you.

Jessie Moore (41:27):

Sydni, what were some of the takeaways for you from this conversation? What stood out to you?

Sydni Brown (41:33):

There was a lot of talk about how to start the process of making connections, especially for students who aren't as outgoing or feel a little bit of stress about taking that first step. I think that it's just very important to recognize that there are so many different types of people and there's so many different ways to make those connections.

(41:52):

Not everybody needs to do it the same way or feel like they're falling behind. And just the importance of being able to have that not only for the future networking purposes, but to just make your college experience better, is to just have good relationships with faculty and staff. I know that firsthand as a student who tries to have those relationships.

Jessie Moore (42:11):

Those are all great points to really highlight. One of the things that from a faculty and staff perspective I was thinking about is that some of the ways that students can build connections can be supported really inherently and deliberately by colleges and universities. We talked with them about relationship accelerators, so things like undergraduate research, first year seminars and learning communities.

(42:35):

Those are all activities that universities can invest in for other reasons too, but it's a nice benefit that they also can support building relationships. I'll note that the Center for Engaged Learning has free resources on many of those relationship accelerator activities on our website. We'll also include a link to those in our show notes. Anything else you wanted to add as you think about the student perspective and what students should take away from this?

Sydni Brown (43:02):

I guess I would just say that no matter what point you are in your college experience, there's always a new opportunity to make a relationship with somebody new, just because I feel like so many things change from semester to semester and you're around such different people every year that there's always opportunity to do that. I would just say have an open mind and take those relationships seriously and importantly.

Jessie Moore (43:26):

Love that. Once again, I'm Jessie Moore.

Sydni Brown (43:40):

I'm Sydni Brown. Thank you for joining us for Making College Worth It from Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning.

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Jessie Moore (43:47):

To learn more about developing connections in college, see our show notes at www.centerforengagedlearning.org. Subscribe to our show wherever you listen to podcasts for more strategies on making college worth it.