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Frank Shushok, Jr. sits down with Peter Felten & Charles C. Schroeder to discover what matters most for a meaningful undergraduate experience

Frank Shushok, Jr.
Shushok: I'd like to begin by sharing how much I enjoyed reading your book. Your tone is hopeful and your counsel immensely practical. While many books these days emphasize the problems of higher education, I found your book ripe with examples of what's going well. In fact, you say, “Excellence abounds at colleges and universities, and not just at the most elite institutions.” Why are you optimistic?

Felten: Thanks for having us! I think a lot of the optimism that I feel about this, and I know my co-authors do, is from what we actually see happening on campuses when we talk to faculty and staff about the work they're doing. Many people are doing good work in ways that matter. At the same time, we find that students are immensely capable and learning and growing in ways that are positive.
Now, everything doesn’t work perfectly, but the potential that’s there in undergraduate education—everywhere we go across the country—is so great that it’s a mistake not to be optimistic and to not think about what’s possible.

The Undergraduate Experience

Schroeder: Another thing that is interesting to me is that governing boards are getting more engaged in issues of quality around the student experience. After serving on boards for years, the most important subcommittee was often the finance subcommittee. That group was constantly looking at the size of the endowment, the drawdowns, enrollment in terms of net revenue, yet they weren’t focusing attention on the experience itself. Today, more and more boards are interested in learning about student engagement, what retention means and what drives it. So, I share Peter’s observation as well.

I also see people in higher education talking more to one another across functional lines. The historical boundaries that have separated academic and student affairs, for example, seem more permeable.

Shushok: I’d like to talk about what you see as a “quality undergraduate experience.” What is it? Can you describe what it looks like when you encounter it?

Schroeder: That’s a really interesting question! I think if you ask that question to different subgroups within an organization, faculty are going to think what really makes a difference, which it does, is the academic experience. They would characterize that as undergraduate education, but because they think more in terms of curriculum, academic programs, and things of that nature. Student affairs professionals are going to emphasize the power of the cocurriculum and students’ engagement with outside-the-classroom experiences.

I try to help institutions envision an undergraduate experience as one that is broadly defined and crosses all boundaries, including academic affairs, student affairs, and administrative services. So it’s the way the students transact with different aspects of their experience, from before they enter to when they exit, and certainly extended to their career and personal lives. If you look at undergraduate education in the broadest sense, you have to think beyond your silo; you have to think about how these things might connect more efficiently and
more powerfully to produce an effect that you can’t get by simply staying in your organizational lane.

Shushok: Peter, how are you thinking about how you turn the entire campus enterprise into an undergraduate experience that matters for students and their learning in your work at Elon? How do you answer the quality question?

Felten: Fundamentally, the answer is that quality is in what students do. Too often we think about quality programs, and of course, we want to have quality programs, but the programs aren’t the purpose. The learning, the doing, the reflecting, the integrating—that’s what students have to do. So a quality undergraduate education has every student doing the sorts of things we know from research and practice that actually lead them to learn, to grow, to develop, to change. So that’s where the rubber meets the road, and if we are looking for measures of what quality is, it’s about what students do.

What are students actually engaged in? How much of their time are they devoting to things that we want them to be engaged in? How are we, through [our] expectations and other means, compelling them and encouraging them to engage in experiences that are educationally powerful?

Schroeder: I think the framework that I find interesting and inspiring, not only for student affairs professionals but also for faculty, is to move more into discussions of engagement. What are students actually engaged in? How much of their time are they devoting to things that we want them to be engaged in? How are we, through [our] expectations and other means, compelling them and encouraging them to engage in experiences that are educationally powerful?

Shushok: At several points, you emphasize that most institutions already have what they need to deliver a robust and meaningful undergraduate experience rich with opportunities for learning and growth. I’d love for you talk about this perspective and what you think readers need to know about maximizing their resources for what matters most for students.

Narratives of Constraint or Growth

Felten: I like to approach this question—these issues—through a framework I learned from Dr. KerryAnn O’Meara and a couple colleagues who analyze faculty careers in a book we cite. They write about narratives of constraint and narratives of growth. They say that faculty and institutions function in different types of narratives. If you are in a narrative of constraint, you are talking about how little time you have, how many ways you are stretched, how you are always dodging disasters. That shapes your behavior, right? It shapes your behavior as an individual and as an institution. O’Meara and her colleagues contrast this with narratives of growth, which views what you’re doing as a faculty member and as an institution as hard, but it’s something that you’re good at doing. You even feel capable of doing more. You are actively learning, struggling, and getting better.

Some of this is not just about absolute values or how much money you have, but what sorts of stories you tell about your institution, yourself, and the work you do. Do you see your work from a deficits perspective or an assets perspective? That doesn’t mean everything is perfect, but it shapes what you think about what is possible, what you think you can do, who you can work with, and why you would work across traditional lines. That’s why you would try something new—because you expect there to be growth rather than you expect there to be problems.

Schroeder: I would take that concept of the growth perspective and begin to look into how an institution is currently marshalling and investing its resources. Almost every institution I work with invests in academic support, but that might as well be in Katmandu if the students who need it, when they need it, aren’t getting it. So while we have invested in various things and we support them, we often look at them as often separate, independent, and disconnected pieces of the student success puzzle.

When I became the Senior Student Affairs Officer at Missouri, in the first month, I met with every dean and asked them, “What can I and my staff do to help you and your faculty succeed?” They almost dropped off their chairs because no one had ever asked them that. So when I was sitting with the dean of engineering, he said they wanted to be more like Purdue. I asked, “What’s Purdue doing that we are not doing?” He said 33 percent of their graduates are women compared to our 11 percent. I wanted to work with him to change that reality.

Responding to an interest and need of the dean substantially changed his view of what we could do
So that’s what we are talking about—it’s not that we need more resources, although more is desirable in some cases and maybe even necessary. Instead, we need to get more optimal effects from using what we have in slightly different or even radically ways.

Felten: Let me add one thing to that too since we try to capture this in the book. From a practical point of view, we are not in a higher education environment where there are lots more resources coming, so we can’t count on more and more money coming to be able to do the work we want. We are in a situation where we have, probably, what we are going to have. So we might as well adopt a perspective that “this is what we have. What can we do with this?” There is a practicality about saying, “I’m not going to wait for someone else to solve this problem for us. It’s ours, so let’s just solve it.”

Schroeder: I’ll give you another quick example. While visiting a really good school in Texas, I observed, not surprisingly, increasing variation in curriculum demand. In fact, the interest in science-related fields was going through the roof. When you looked at advising loads, scientists had huge loads, while some faculty in philosophy and religion had much smaller ones. So the philosophers did something very unusual—they volunteered to advise the science majors. Now, that may sound like a simple thing, but sometimes that’s heresy! At first, some faculty said, “What can I do?” Then they said, “Well heck, if they can’t advise freshmen, maybe I can?” So they worked collaboratively, and that made the loads much more equitable.

That example illustrates a way of using what you already have but in a more creative way. However, it often challenges deeply rooted notions of what faculty do, and how they do it, and where they do it. To think that, somehow, a humanist could understand the freshman science curriculum is kind of off the table in many ways, but I’ve floated that idea with other groups of scientists and philosophy professors, and they love it! But I think people are reluctant to even suggest it because the idea is so out of whack with the way we normally think about who advises and what you need to advise. By challenging basic assumptions such as these, we can not only meet a particular need but also create new way of thinking about working together.

Shushok: What you’re highlighting, and what I appreciate so much, is that we have great teachers with terrific expertise and fabulous training. In many cases, we already have facilities and resources in place but a deficit mindset. With a slight shift from a deficit to asset mindset, we possess the opportunity to rearrange what we already have to make a significant difference in how students experience the campus. There’s a third component you emphasized in your book. While you acknowledge that student learning must be at the heart of an institution’s work, you also underscore that the most effective colleges and universities are learning organizations themselves. What does it mean to be a learning organization, and what conditions exist on a campus to facilitate an “everyone is learning” ethos?

Positive Restlessness

Felten: We use a phrase in the book a few times that George Kuh and colleagues came up with a couple decades ago: positive restlessness. The idea is that an institution, program, department, or college can have a positively restless orientation that is absolutely helpful for growth. There are the people you hear say, “We think we are doing these things pretty well, but surely we could do better,” or “we could do this with more students,” or “we could help those few students who aren’t being successful.” The idea is that there is always an opportunity to grow.

Schroeder: The notion of a learning organization comes from the perspective of Peter Senge who talked more about systems and processes than functions and fragments. Going back to when I was in college, things
were fairly simple, but even as I moved through college, more and more students came in larger and larger numbers, and as that happened, specialization started to take hold. Roles people had assumed as generalists became more specialized, which led to much more compartmentalized and eventual fragmentation. As a result, we tended to focus our efforts within our administrative boundaries, not recognizing that enhancing the student experience is a process that crosses many traditional organizational boundaries and a lot of different units. To the degree that we can make that process seamless by improving the handoffs in the process makes a big difference.

Felten: This works in enrollment management and similar areas, but it also works in the curriculum. I see this sometimes in my own department and other campuses when faculty will say, “The students don’t know how to write in our senior seminar.” We blame the students. It’s partly on the students, but if they get all the way to being seniors, and they don’t know how to write in our discipline, surely that has to be partly on us too. So, how do we talk, and how do we plan, and how do we work together? And it doesn’t have to be onerous kinds of assessments.

Some colleagues of mine at Elon do a spectacular thing where once a month, the faculty in the department get together, and one faculty member brings in a couple of examples of student work from a particular course. Then, the faculty talk about “Is this the kind of work we’d expect to see from students at this level in our program?” They don’t talk about whether this is a good course or not or whether it’s a clever assignment. They talk about the student work and come to some agreement about second-year students in this major—what kind of writing should they be able to do, what kind of thinking, what kind of skills? How should third-year students be different? They don’t leave those things at “I’m going to change my course, you’re going to change your course…” They all leave instead having a better shared understanding of student learning, and their courses get better, and their students get better because of it.

Schroeder: One of the outcomes that separates the more educationally effective institutions from others is that they have a cultural ethos of improvement—again, positive restlessness. They always want to do better. So what I’ve found in terms of how that is best expressed is they often ask themselves these questions: Are we making a difference? Are we making enough of a difference? How do we know? At Alverno College in Milwaukee, a diminutive five-foot-one nun who was president used to ask the faculty: “What would students miss if they did not take your class?” That is so simple, it’s profound! What if we routinely raised questions such as these: What would you miss if you didn’t live in a residence hall? What would you miss if you weren’t in a Greek organization? Those are fundamental questions of purpose, and that’s what we tried to do with the book in terms of what matters. What would students miss if they did not engage in what we think is important? By exploring questions such as these, you begin to start looking at outcomes and really what matters most in achieving them.

Shushok: I hope that readers of About Campus have seen our recent effort to promote “failure” and “struggle,” ironically, as something to celebrate. You seem
to agree and put it this way: “While working to learn something, people often struggle, and sometimes fail. Misunderstandings, misconceptions, and outright mistakes line the path to enlightenment.” I'd appreciate you unpacking this sentiment, and I'm interested in hearing how your careers have taught you this personally.

Felten: Charles and I were talking about this earlier, and sometimes, I hear colleagues, and sometimes, I hear myself saying that students today don’t have experience with failure, and this is a problem. Actually, I’ve come to think that’s not true. You can’t be 18 or 20 and not have experience with relationship failures, witnessing failures in your personal life and academics, and things like this. Students have experience with failures. What they have less experience with is how to struggle through those things and how to learn to be resilient in the face of those failures. We have to help all our students the capacity to keep working and keep working and keep working, even when you don’t see that you are making as much progress as you want.

The second lesson is one we talk about some in the book, and one of our co-authors, Leo Lambert, particularly talks about this a lot on our campus at Elon where he is President. You need someone there to point out in a gentle but clear way, “That didn’t work, and you’re capable of more. We have high expectations; you're not meeting those expectations, but you could.”

Shushok: So you got the “A”!!

Felten: I got the “A, but you could do more than that,” and when I read that, she really shook my world. And I can point to other moments in my career when someone, usually it’s not when I got the “A,” but when someone said, “What were you doing there? How could you have done this differently?”

Shushok: Maybe that's another form of that restlessness that you talked about, that even though our students are having good experiences, the institutions that are making the biggest difference are saying, “We got an ‘A,’ but could we do even better?”

Felten: Exactly.

Relationships Matter

Schroeder: I’m reminded of a visit I made to Sewanee, The University of the South, which is often described as Oxford in Tennessee. It’s on a mountain, and some faculty still wear robes, and it’s a very interesting place. I was talking to a faculty member, asking him about his attendance policy. He looked perplexed and said there was no attendance policy. I asked if the students always came to class. He replied, “Oh yes, they always come to class…well, no, last week Sarah didn’t come to class.” I asked what happened when he found out Sarah didn’t come to class. He said, “I immediately called her on her cell phone.” I asked him if he told her how bad she was for not coming to class. He said quite the contrary, “Sarah, I don’t know why you missed class today, but the quality of the intellectual discourse was diminished by your absence. We can’t have the quality experience as a community of learners when you’re not there.” This professor is sending a very different message than this all too often refrain “Open your books, I’m going to lecture to you about what’s important so you feed it back to me.” At Sewanee, student engagement in learning matters a great deal, and expectations as well as relationships are critical for it to occur.

So that’s one of the things we tried to emphasize in the book. How do we create more empowering expectations and relationships, not only between faculty and students, but also staff–faculty, student–staff, and student-to-student connections? At the schools I work with, the students are academically capable, but most of the challenges they face in terms of engagement are the noncognitive issues of intellectual self-confidence, efficacy, and things of that nature. All too often, we tend to discount the importance of these concerns both in and outside the classroom.

Shushok: What I appreciate about what you are both discussing is that individual actions of a faculty member or a staff member change the course of history for students. Many About Campus readers are “in
the trenches” so to speak. They are in the classroom, working in residence halls, developing policies, raising money, among many other important tasks. We try to remind readers that institutional transformation is a collection of individual actions. I often wonder, therefore, how readers are thinking about institutional transformation and their view of their role in it? As you think about ways that higher education needs to change, what advice do you have for people in diverse roles who want to play a role in institutional transformation, especially related to the undergraduate experience?

How do we create more empowering expectations and relationships, not only between faculty and students, but also staff–faculty, student–staff, and student-to-student connections?

Schroeder: I’ll give you an example from the book that is very different than what most of us even have on our radar screen. It involves a noncollege-educated woman who is head of the snack bar at Wofford College. One of our colleague’s daughters was about to graduate from Wofford, so he called her a week early and said, “I’m really excited about coming to graduation, I’m so happy you’ve worked so hard to earn the degree. While I’m on campus, I want to meet the president.” She immediately replied, “No you don’t.” He said, “Did you not hear me? I want to meet the president.” His daughter said, “No, you need to meet Miss Rita.” He asked, “Who is Miss Rita?” She replied, “Miss Rita is the most important person on campus! She runs the snack bar.” He said, “Well, what makes her so special?”

“She knows everybody. You walk through and she says, ‘How’d you do on that math test?’ ‘Did you and your boyfriend reconcile?’ ‘Are you going to wear black and gold to support the football team on Saturday?’”

Do you know the most amazing thing about that? None of the things that students value most are in Miss Rita’s job description! There is nothing in her job description that says she needs to treat students that way. Her job description says she needs to take a product, ring it out, get the money, and move on. So, Miss Rita is spectacular because Miss Rita’s heart is, in some ways, so rare. But when student assistants working in the Development Office call graduates of Wofford and ask for money, the graduates don’t ask how the Chemistry Department is doing, or what’s going on here or there. They always ask how Miss Rita is doing.

So here you have a person like other front-line staff that are the backbone of an institution that is rarely valued. In many cases, there are more Miss Ritas—the kinds of relationships they form with students, the kind of support they provide, the connections they provide. In the book, we talk a lot about faculty and student affairs as educators, but oftentimes, some of the more meaningful things occur in those kinds of transactions with a person like Miss Rita, that keeps things going and can be very instrumental in creating that climate that constantly communicates “You matter to me.” Every time she has that transaction, she’s saying, “Frank, you matter more to me than simply the exchange of a dollar and a half for what you just bought.” That is powerful in terms of creating those conditions that makes this a special place.

Shushok: That underscores one of the key themes of the whole book, which is “relationships matter.” Peter, how would you answer that question?

The Power of Culture

Felten: I think Charles took all the good parts! But I think there are things we do, just to connect to Charles’ point, within the realm of our individual jobs that we can do well and that we can connect up to “what matters”—to the institutional mission, to those relationships with students. So Miss Rita can talk to each student and know their names. We also, each individually, contribute to the culture of the campus and seeing that part of our job is to create the culture where our colleagues and we and all of our students can thrive, live, and learn together. So, if we are just staying in
our lane and doing our own work individually really well, that’s good, but seeing that part of it is we create the culture together, that we hold up the culture together. So if we want to be the kind of place where students feel welcome, that’s the job for all of us.

Another example is from my own work; we did a project looking into where students learn to write on campus. We know they learn in classes, but where do they think they learn to write, and how do they learn? Some of the people who students named as their writing teachers are actually program assistants in departments because a lot of students work in the offices on campus. And before these student workers complete a writing task for their work, they go to the program assistant and say, “Can you take a look at this?” That was striking, but what that suggested to us is that we, as an institution, need to think about how we support program assistants in thinking about themselves as writers and teachers of writing. Once we do that, we see that all of us are responsible for the whole education of a student, and then, we’re a long way there.

And back then, I thought what I was doing was teaching history. As someone later said to me, “No, you are teaching students!” You are teaching students history—that intervening word, that you are teaching individuals, and it matters who they are.

Shushok: I’d like to shift for a moment and explore a more personal angle with our time together. One question I’m asking people I interview is how they’ve changed. I’d value you reflecting about the ways the 25-year-old Peter and Charles are different than the 40-year-old Peter and Charles. How are the Peter and Charles of today different than the 40-year-old ones? What are the most salient lessons growing older has taught you?

Schroeder: I’ll give a stab at that. For 25, I can’t remember what I did 25 minutes ago! I think from a professional point of view, over time, I’ve developed a much greater understanding and respect for campus culture, and the power of culture. The other thing that I’ve probably come to appreciate, because I am by nature a “Ready-Fire-Aim” kind of person, that just because it seems to be right doesn’t mean that other people are going to embrace it. The process of organizational change is really challenging and often takes more time and energy than you expect.

On a personal level, probably the most transformational moment that I have had, which was most important to me as a professional and as a person, was when I was at Auburn back in the mid-1970s. The Lilly Foundation gave Outward Bound grants for college faculty who wanted to learn more about experiential education by actually being placed in an alien environment—the wilderness! You literally were put in very challenging and often quite uncomfortable situations, in my case in the Sawtooth Mountains of Idaho, with a team of 12 people—all of whom were much younger than me. We were literally immersed into a situation—Outward Bound calls it “dunk ‘em and dry ‘em”—where you had to work with others, had to be resilient, had to develop a sense of tenacity and perseverance in the face of adversity. I think that tenacity, that stick-to-it-ness, would be something that has helped me personally as well as throughout my career.

I think the opportunities to really begin to look at experiential learning and the transformational power of experiences was something that I tried to incorporate both as a student affairs professional and also a professor, often expecting more of my staff and my students than they expected of themselves. For example, in my classes, I often used things like case method and interviews and other things, so that people could get immersed into something, and from that pull out the things that were most meaningful.

Felten: I’m not going to talk about anything nearly so profound…but in thinking about this, when I was 25, I was in graduate school trying to become a historian and was so focused on becoming a historian. And back then, I thought what I was doing was teaching history. As someone later said to me, “No, you are teaching students!” You are teaching students history—that intervening word, that you are teaching individuals, and it matters who they are. Probably the most profound thing I’ve learned in my career is to pay attention to those relationships. I find myself regularly thinking, “I have to do this, then I have to do this, then this…” But, with whom?

Recognizing that the relationships and the relationship building and the culture work is part of my work, and maybe it’s the most important part of the work—that’s something that I’ve had to learn and sometimes relearn. Like Charles, I feel like I’m often doing a lot, and I step back and say, “Why, and with
whom?” I’m usually able to answer that in ways that feel good, but if I skip the “Why” and “With whom” questions, I don’t do it as well, don’t enjoy it as much, and none of us achieve what’s possible. When I remember that I’m teaching students, and I have a student in my office who didn’t do as well as she wanted or I long-term actors, and recognizing that helps us understand the value in the work we are doing—not just the short-term work to make sure we retain that one student, to help a student in crisis, or help someone move from a “B” to an “A” in my history class. Higher education is the means (maybe it’s the best means we have) to build stronger, more inclusive, more just communities, and a better world. That is why I’m doing what I’m doing, I hope that is why my colleagues in higher education are doing this work. That’s long-term, important work, so even when it seems difficult, I try to remind myself, “We’re on the right side, and we’re pushing toward something that isn’t short term, isn’t just about tomorrow or the bottom line, but something bigger.”

Schroeder: I would say that one of the things that doing this book taught me is when you think about our core themes—relationships, learning, alignment, improvement—I wonder how often we even talk about those in staff meetings. Whether you’re a residence hall director or an associate vice president or associate professor, I think a lot of what we want to accomplish is often mediated by the lack of good relationships, by the lack of clarity of purpose of most important, of understanding the broader vision and where things fit. So many times, I hear on campus I often hear folks say: I’d like to do that but, I’m only a residence hall director, an assistant non-tenured faculty member, an associate dean of students, etc… I’ve even heard a presidents say, “I’m only a president!” So in many cases, people are waiting to be told what to do instead of acting on what they believe they should do. Everyone has a certain amount of control over a certain aspect of who they are, and what they are, and where they are, and they need to act on that. Don’t wait to be told; follow the slogan of Nike, “Just do it!”.

Years ago, there was a 60 Minutes interview with Grace Hopper, the oldest female commissioned officer in the United States Navy, and a physicist with many patents and other achievements. Morley Safer turned to her and asked how she was so successful in the Navy as a woman in a male-dominated military organization. She, a little grandmotherly white-haired woman with twinkling eyes, said, “Well Morley, I always found it easier to apologize than to get permission.” So I think we are often so risk-averse, waiting to be told, that the limits we often complain about are self-imposed. The most successful places where I’ve worked and consulted at didn’t have that perspective. They took some risks (they weren’t unreasonable risks), challenged basic assumptions about what we are doing and why we are doing it, asked themselves can we do it better, and they acted on that. That little seed started to grow, things changed over time, and
in many cases, students as well as institutions were transformed.

**Shushok:** *I think that is a terrific way to conclude this interview—with advice from Charles Schroeder… “Don’t ask for permission—just do it and apologize later!” That’s a good lesson for our readers.*

**Schroeder:** And have a good attorney!

**Shushok:** *Well your book, The Undergraduate Experience: Focusing Institutions on What Matters Most, is worth everyone’s read, and I hope once we finish the interview that you will sign my book!*