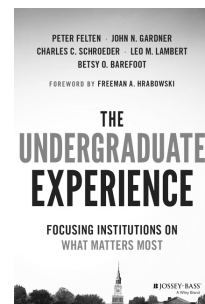


Improving undergraduate education

***The Undergraduate Experience: Focusing Institutions on What Matters Most*, Peter Felten, John N. Gardner, Charles C. Schroeder, Leo M. Lambert, Betsy O. Barefoot.**

ISBN: 9781119050742 (hb.), San Francisco: Wiley, xx+247pp., 2016.

Reviewed by Chris Mayer



The Undergraduate Experience: Focusing Institutions on What Matters Most identifies successful practices in undergraduate education worthy of adoption by others. The foreword, written by Freeman A. Hrabowski III, President of University of Maryland, Baltimore County, highlights two overarching ideas that serve as the foundation for the book's six themes. The first is that successful institutions have a culture of 'positive restlessness', which is a concept discussed by George Kuh and his co-authors in *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions that Matter*. Hrabowski describes institutions with positive restlessness as those that are 'constantly seeking and striving to improve, determined not to be satisfied' (p. viii). The second overarching idea is 'optimism at a time when we need it more than ever' due to the challenges facing higher education (p. viii). While the authors acknowledge the existence of obstacles that make success difficult, they still believe it is possible to achieve excellence.

The introduction begins with a reference to *Transforming a College: The Story of a Little-Known College's Strategic Climb to National Distinction* by George Keller. In this book, Keller presents the strategy Elon University used to transform itself (p. xvii). While they praise Keller's study of Elon, the authors distinguish their work from Keller's through their focus on successful practices at multiple institutions instead of just one as well as their articulation of the two questions below that they have written the book to address.

'What matters most in the undergraduate experience?'
'What is possible when colleges and universities focus on what matters most' (p. xviii)?

The book employs the positive deviant approach to discover those who have achieved success despite facing challenges so that others with similar challenges may adapt these successful practices to their situation. For those unfamiliar with it, the positive deviant approach is described and applied in detail in Pascale, Sternin, and

Sternin (2010), and Heath and Heath (2010) develop a modified version of it with their focus on 'bright spots'. From their study of 'positive deviants', the authors propose the following six themes as essential for creating successful undergraduate experiences: Learning matters, Relationships matter, Expectations matter, Alignment matters, Improvement matters, Leadership matters.

Each of the six themes has its own chapter, and each of these chapters includes action principles illustrated by multiple examples. One action principle for the chapter on learning is to 'help students integrate learning opportunities', and it is exemplified by Carlton College's approach to curricular integration through integrative projects that 'focus on transfer and synthesis across the disciplines' (p. 35). The authors note that this curricular effort promoted collaborative course planning and led to academics and staff taking ownership for institutional learning goals (pp. 35-36).

Another theme is that relationships matter. One example that highlights relationship building is Elon University's weekly College Coffee events that occur for 40 minutes at a time when no classes are scheduled. These weekly gatherings allow academics, other staff, and students to interact, and their success provides support for the action principle of 'encouraging everyone on campus to cultivate relationships' (p. 60). Another example is Duke University's FLUNCH Program (Faculty Lunch) that funds 'opportunities for students to invite faculty members for one-on-one lunches' (p. 46). The FLUNCH Program is complemented by the FINvite Program (Faculty Invitation), which allows academics to invite students to dinner, with the University providing catered food and transportation for students (p. 46). These types of programs are not common across American higher education, but the authors argue that they should be because they strengthen relationships across the campuses in which they are used.

When describing the theme of institutional alignment, the authors describe how Christopher Newport University (CNU) calibrated course schedules, enhanced academic advising, provided early and frequent feedback on student performance, and created a comprehensive early-alert system (pp. 100-102). All of these academic programs and campus practices were aligned to achieve the institutional mission, which resulted in a 10 per cent increase in retention and a 20 per cent increase in six-year graduation rates (p. 103). Although the authors do not always identify quantifiable results associated with the practices in the book, in the case of CNU these results validate the action principle to 'align academic programs and campus practices'.

In the chapter on improvement, the authors describe the Harvard Assessment Seminar initiated by Richard Light over 30 years ago (p. 118). These seminars were held over dinner each month and included academics and staff from other institutions. At each seminar, participants would 'identify a question about students' collegiate experiences and then create a plan to gather and analyse relevant evidence' (p. 118). Participants discussed the results of their inquiry and used these results to inform efforts to improve student learning. While many academics bristle at the thought of assessment, the collegial research-oriented engagement described by Light presents an approach worthy of consideration.

The authors highlight the importance of leadership for those institutions seeking to improve. In exemplifying the principle of 'articulating clear, aspirational goals linked to institutional mission and values', readers return to CNU where the president, Paul Trimble, led a transformation of the institution. To accomplish this transformation, CNU 'sharpened its focus on the undergraduate experience and the arts and sciences, eliminated professional programs not in keeping with that vision, increased rigor of academic programs, and committed to a student-centred institutional culture' (p. 143). This led to a 500 per cent increase in the number of applicants in ten years and a significant increase in applicant standardised test scores (p. 143).

The authors end the book by highlighting the importance of culture, especially 'positive restlessness' and the development and implementation of a strategic

plan (pp. 166-167). Another important component of successfully implementing the ideas in the book, they argue, is breaking down silos within institutions so that academics and other staff can collaborate to improve the undergraduate student experience (p. 172).

While the title includes the qualifier 'American' higher education, the book is relevant to Australian higher education, and its cases actually include non-American institutions. Those looking for in-depth case studies with rigorous application of theoretical perspectives will be disappointed. While the authors do employ some theoretical work, and actually rely on a significant list of references, their focus is on providing multiple successful examples in undergraduate education rather than focusing on just one or two. This makes the book of great use to practitioners (academics, staff, and administrators). The examples it provides are powerful, and the book would be very useful for an institution in the process of strategic planning. Because there is no discussion of criticism of the practices it presents or advice for implementation, those reading the book should consider it a launching point for further research and discussion of the successful practices it highlights. The book would also be an excellent read for an institution-wide professional development program focused on improving an institution's undergraduate experience.

Chris Mayer is Associate Dean for Strategy, Policy and Assessment and an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the United States Military Academy (West Point).

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AUR

Australian Universities' Review



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For a journal reference:

King, D.A. (2004). What different countries get for their research spending. *Nature* 430, 311–316.

For a reference to a chapter in a collection:

McCollow, J. & Knight, J. (2005). Higher Education in Australia: An Historical Overview, in M. Bella, J. McCollow & J. Knight (Eds). *Higher Education in Transition*. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press.

For a web reference:

Markwell, D. (2007). The challenge of student engagement. Retrieved from http://www.catl.uwa.edu.au/_data/page/95565/Student_engagement_-_Don_Markwell_-_30_Jan_2007.pdf.

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Australian Universities' Review

- 3 Letter from the editors: Introduction to the special issue – Challenging the Privatised University

Kristen Lyons, Jeremy Tager & Louise Sales

- 5 The conference: An overview and assessment
Richard Hill

Conferences come and go: some you remember, others you don't. This event, organised by the University of Queensland and Friends of the Earth, and supported by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), National Alliance for Public Universities (NAPU) and the Ngara Institute, was in the former category.

- 8 The Brisbane Declaration

Part 1: An analysis of problems associated with the privatised university

- 9 Critiquing neoliberalism in Australian universities
Jeannie Rea

While students chanting 'No cuts, No fees, No corporate universities' may be dismissed as youthful hyperbole by some, it is not as superficial a characterisation of the state of our public university system as it seems. The withdrawal of government funding and fee deregulation is the core issue for Australian higher education. It is even more stark because we have a largely government funded system.

- 15 The Death of Socrates: Managerialism, metrics and bureaucratisation in universities

Yancey Orr & Raymond Orr

Neoliberalism exalts the ability of unregulated markets to optimise human relations, but it is paradoxically built on rigorous systems of rules, metrics and managers. The potential transition to a market-based tuition and research-funding model for higher education in Australia has therefore been preceded by managerialism, metrics and bureaucratisation.

- 26 Democratisation or management and corporate capture? Theses on the governance crisis of Australia's semi-privatised public universities

Andrew G Bonnell

This paper proceeds from the view that managerial capture has already become a fundamental problem after largely untrammelled managerialism in our public universities, and that this problem is likely to be compounded by further shifts towards deregulation and de facto privatisation. This is the direction that current federal government policy is trying to take in the higher education sector.

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Nick Riemer

If we want to combat contemporary 'neoliberal' attacks on universities, we should start by refusing the way that their pseudo-rationalities already determine so many aspects of the intellectual and institutional regimes that we consider under threat.

- 42 Law student wellbeing: A neoliberal conundrum
Margaret Thornton

The discourse around student wellness is a marked feature of the 21st century Australian legal academy. This article argues that the neo-liberalisation of higher education is invariably overlooked in the literature as a primary cause of stress, even though it is responsible for the high fees, large classes and an increasingly competitive job market.

- 51 Agnosis in the university workplace

Andrew Whelan

A significant challenge for the privatised university is its impendance of particular forms of effective engagement and action in teaching and research, notably with respect to inequities in the broader social context, and the position of the university within that context. In the face of significant resource constraints, several factors combine to produce a particular form of 'ignorance'.

Part 3: What constitutes the good university?

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Fern Thompsett

As universities are swept by a near-global tide of capitalist restructuring, myriad forms of resistance are also on the rise. This paper explores the complex tensions involved in working simultaneously within the academy, and engaging in activism beyond it.

- 67 What are good universities?

Raewyn Connell

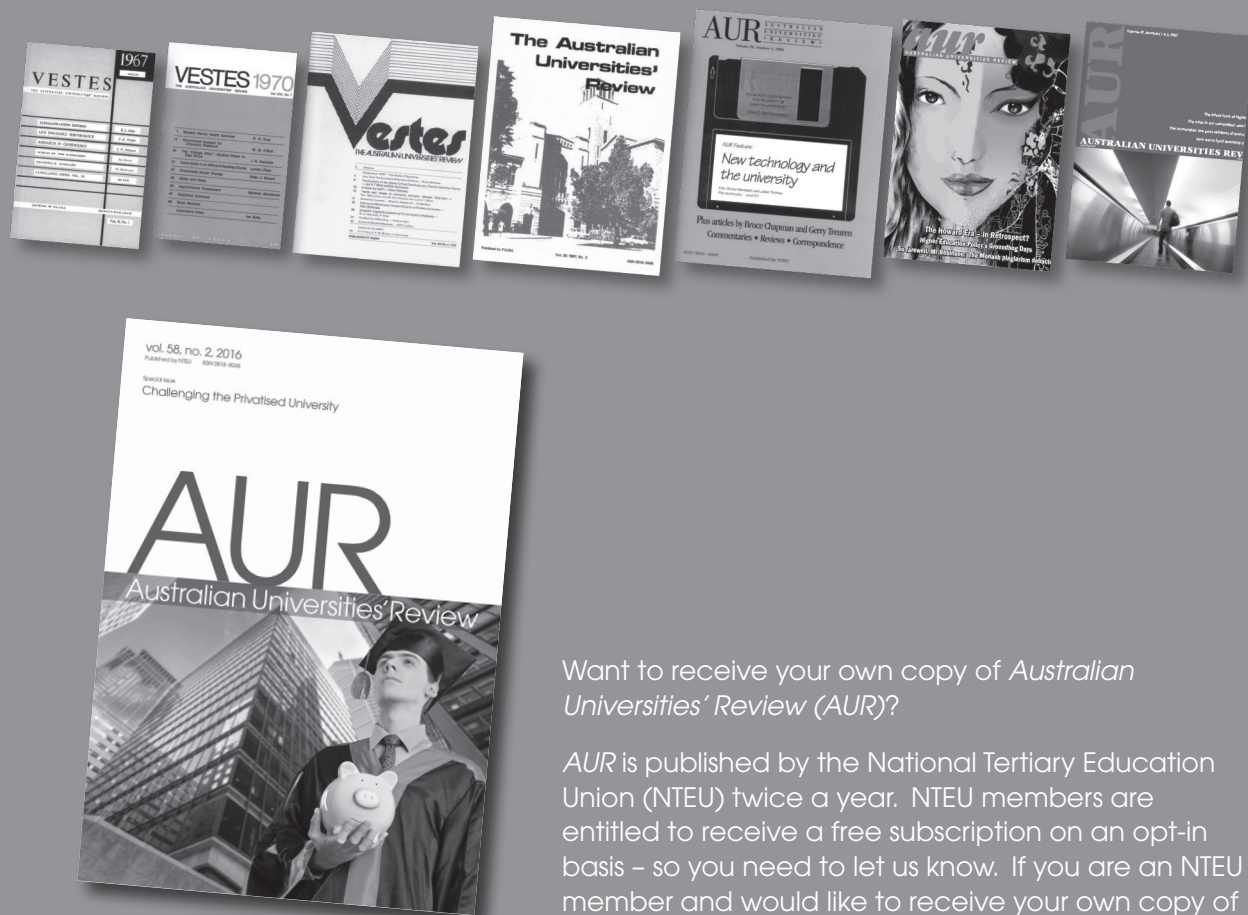
This paper considers how we can arrive at a concept of the good university. The best place to start in defining a good university is by considering the work universities do. This leads to issues about the conditions of the workforce as a whole, the global economy of knowledge, and the innovations bubbling up around the edges of this economy.

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