

[Changing Higher Ed Podcast 148 with Host Dr. Drumm McNaughton and Guest Elliot Felix - Boost Higher Ed Enrollment and Graduation Rates – The Power of Student Support and Belonging](#)

Welcome to Changing Higher Ed, a podcast dedicated to helping higher education leaders improve their institutions, with your host, Dr. Drumm McNaughton, CEO of the Change Leader, a consultancy that helps higher ed leaders holistically transform their institutions. Learn more at changinghighered.com. And now, here's your host, Drumm McNaughton.

Drumm McNaughton 00:31

Thank you, David. Our guest today is Elliot Felix, CEO of Brightspot Strategy, a consultancy focusing on attracting and retaining students by improving the student experience, their spaces, student services, and technology. He and his team have done this at multiple institutions, including MIT, NYU, NC State, and UVA, and have touched over a million students in this process. Elliot and his team have significantly impacted institutions' enrollment and retention. He joins us today to talk about how higher ed institutions can improve enrollment retention and graduation rates by redesigning the student experience for today's students. Elliott, welcome to the show.

Elliot Felix 01:17

Good to be here.

Drumm McNaughton 01:18

We've had some good conversations on the phone, and I'm looking forward to this. You have a consulting firm where you're doing incredible work with higher ed folks, especially around enrollment, retention, graduation rates, student services, etc. It's a big challenge for higher ed right now, isn't it?

Elliot Felix 01:43

It is, it is. I feel lucky that I get to learn and help at Brightspot every day. We've been working with more than 100 colleges and universities to help them understand their student experience and figure out how to move the needle by changing the space, student services, staffing, systems, and sometimes everything. So there's a lot of change, and it's great to be a part of it.

Drumm McNaughton 02:09

It is. Please give us some background to help the audience understand who you are and how you came to do this.

Elliot Felix 02:19

I started as an architect, working on academic, cultural, and public facilities. After a while in that profession, I was frustrated because we didn't know enough about the people in the institutions we were designing for. We were charged to create X amount of space on y site. But the why behind it, the who behind it, and the how behind it was not there.

So, I went to grad school at MIT and tried to fill that gap, learning more about the people, the institutions, and how the people work. Then I found a unique company – it was as if a management consultancy and an architecture firm had a baby. What we would do was write design briefs. We would define the problem for the architect to solve by conducting the research, benchmarking, looking at the trends, talking and serving people with focus groups, and performing ethnography and scenario planning. I really enjoyed that work. I got to work on a lot of interesting libraries and campus plans. But toward the end, I realized that this research and stakeholder engagements uncovered many problems and solutions. But we only had one tool in our toolbox to help: space. So, I founded Brightspot as a multi-tooled consulting firm where we could help not just with the facilities, but student services, staffing, and systems. That was 12 years and 100 universities ago.

Drumm McNaughton 03:55

That's really great. Returning to the challenges around enrollment, retention, and graduation, there are a lot of headwinds and big unknowns. There's the [demographic cliff](#), mergers, closers, etc. I'm intrigued by your design philosophy and how that goes. If I understand it, the first step is understanding who your prospective students are, isn't that right?

Elliot Felix 04:29

Yes. We apply a design-thinking approach to transforming the spaces, services, staffing, and systems. For us, design has three pillars. One is understanding people. The other is thinking holistically and about the systems. And the third is testing and trying things out. Prototyping. It starts with understanding the people.

Drumm McNaughton 04:55

So with that, you're looking at who the people are, their needs, how they're different, etc. Tell us more.

Elliot Felix 05:04

Yeah. When we do that research, it involves pairing many things together. It's always a mixed-methods approach. You want to go broad, say, with a survey. Our recent national survey was interesting. We found that student satisfaction is not yet back to pre-pandemic levels. Not that it's about going back. I think you and I agree with that. It's about moving forward. So, you want to go broad, but you also want to go deep with interviews, workshops, and focus groups.

You also want to pair qualitative and quantitative data. You want to understand the student's story, but you also want to look at the data. You want to go objective and subjective, right? So, what's the data on the transactions? How many advising appointments are you making? How many laptops are getting checked out? How satisfied are people with advising in technology?

Finally, you want to go internal and external. So, inside the institution, what are the students, faculty, staff, alums, and corporate partners saying? Outside the institution, what are the changes? What's the benchmarking? What does that tell us about the external environment and trends? So, it's a mixed-methods approach, trying to understand the students, faculty, and staff. Who are they?

What are their expectations? What are their motivations? What are their needs?
And how are those changing?

Drumm McNaughton 06:31

It's interesting because what I'm hearing you describe is very similar to when [we work with boards of directors](#). When you've seen one board, you've seen one board. It sounds like you're experiencing the same thing. When you're looking at it from a [student services and enrollment retention](#) perspective at one university, you've seen one university.

Elliot Felix 06:56

Yeah. That's very much the case. It's interesting. I was talking to our team about one of the seminal books in my consulting career written by an MIT Emeritus, Professor Edgar Schein. He coined “organizational culture” 50 years ago, and it is a pillar in organizational consulting. One of his principles in process consultation is to access your ignorance, which is a fantastic way to work with someone. On the one hand, you want to bring your expertise. On the other hand, you want to be looking for patterns.

You can be talking to this university about student services, for example, and you know about the idea of a one-stop shop, but it has yet to come up in conversation, so you ask about it. So, on the one hand, you have this experience and expertise. But on the other hand, you must access and take full advantage of your ignorance. Have the beginner's mindset and that curiosity to ask questions. Don't just look for how this university is like all the others, but how it is unique through its

curriculum, culture, and campus life. It's important to understand that when you've seen one university, you've seen one university.

Drumm McNaughton 08:14

It's so interesting because I hear you referencing the [Johari Window](#).

Elliot Felix 08:21

Oh, I love the Johari window. I love it.

Drumm McNaughton 08:24

For those of us who are neophytes with it, it's what you know, what somebody else knows, what you both know, and what neither of you knows. It's why you do qualitative research, not so much quantitative, to find out what nobody knows. Does that make sense?

Elliot Felix 08:45

It does. Also, in the same way, that a great leader has a huge Johari window with great self-awareness and transparency, a great college or university is continuously taking steps to understand themselves and broaden that picture of who they are and where they're headed, whether it's through their office of institutional research and assessment, they're using some outside consultants or some combination.

I'll add to this that, so far, we've been talking about research, stakeholder engagement, and benchmarking to understand people. But there's also an opportunity to go beyond that, not just to understand those people to help identify their problems but to solve them together. Enlisting the power of students, faculty, and staff to come up with ideas about the future is a key part of design-thinking is that co-creating aspect.

Drumm McNaughton 09:50

People support what they help create.

Elliot Felix 09:53

Amen. Yeah.

Drumm McNaughton 09:54

So, you've worked with many schools, 110.

Elliot Felix 09:59

When we crossed the 100 barrier, we had a little party. It was nice and fun. But, yes, every school is a little bit different. But it's been fun working with all these colleges and universities over the years and helping them change.

Drumm McNaughton 10:10

Generally, what are you seeing across institutions that work for [improving enrollment, retention, and graduation rates](#)?

Elliot Felix 10:25

Every college or university is a little different regarding specifics, like the challenges they face and the solutions, strategies, and tactics they choose to address. But there are some common themes. The first one is belonging, which is so important. There's a lot of excellent research and scholarship on this. I love Dr. Terrell Strayhorn's book *College Students' Sense of Belonging*. It's a great place to start with folks trying to understand that. He talks about belonging as feeling like you matter, like you're cared for, like you're a part of something, and like you're enough. There's something to that. Belonging is the lens that students see their experience through. So, if they feel like they're part of something, they matter, and they're supported, then their experiences will reinforce that. That will be the foundation for them to form relationships, learn, build skills and a network, and find a career path. If they don't, each of those experiences and interactions can take them down instead of up.

The ACHA-National College Health Assessment shows that only 65% of students feel a sense of belonging. That's about 70,000 students. This is a pretty broad survey. It's less so for some groups. I believe the Survey of Student Engagement started tracking belonging two years ago. They put it much higher at around 80%. I still think that's an important place to focus on because we know that belonging significantly impacts retention. I believe one thing that NSSE [The National Survey of Student Engagement] found is that students who feel that sense of belonging are about 40% more likely to continue from the first to second year when most of the attrition happens. So, focusing on belonging is a trend we're seeing and

something we're helping folks work on. There are a lot of different ways to work on it.

Drumm McNaughton 12:35

How can you help instill a sense of belonging in students?

Elliot Felix 12:42

You need a multifaceted approach because space plays a role, like identity and affinity centers for LGBTQ+ and first-gen students and for student veterans and parents. They can play a massive role in belonging. But, unfortunately, we know from our surveys that that's one of the things that students are the least satisfied with. Of the 68 metrics that we track, it's the second lowest. There's only a 44% satisfaction rate. But the good news is that from a different study, we know that about half of institutions plan to improve or build a new identity center in the coming years.

Space can play a role both for a specific community, like an underserved community, but also as a common space, like a student union library. Place and space can help create that sense of belonging. But so can the things that happen in it. Their events and programs, like student support organizations, peer-to-peer relationships, and service delivery, can draw students together. It can involve meeting with a peer advisor or mentor, an RA in your residence hall, delivering support services in the writing center, or attending a tutoring session. It's about a multifaceted approach to belonging that includes space, support services, events, and programs. You want to give students many different ways to build those

relationships and connections because you're certainly more likely to retain them if they feel that sense of connection.

Drumm McNaughton 14:24

I heard you reference support for students several times. I suspect that being able to provide those services for students is another good bucket.

Elliot Felix 14:36

Belonging is the foundation. The next step up is that sense of support. The National Survey of Student Engagement has what it terms the “supportive environment,” which has to do with the availability of learning support services, connecting, and gaining support for well-being. We know that that's the strongest predictor of their success. It has the highest correlation.

What's interesting is that colleges and universities offer so much support to students. One of the reasons I wrote my book was to help students and parents understand all the great things that colleges and universities offer. In the consulting work that I do, so many of these excellent services go unused or, at least, underused, like the usage of the writing center or career center or talking with your advisor not just once a semester when it's time to register but throughout. Universities and colleges have an opportunity to support their students with this full range of services, whether it's tutoring, writing, advising, career, technology, support, counseling, or [studying abroad](#). There's so much there.

Either students often don't know about it, they may not be comfortable using it, it might be in the wrong place, or it might be offered at the wrong time. Therefore, colleges and universities need to find ways to integrate this support and make it more visible, accessible, and normalized so it isn't a stigma. Many people incorrectly assume that going to the writing center means you can't write. But it's about going there because they want to keep getting better. It's like how Michael Phelps still has a swim coach. He's the wittiest Olympian ever and is crushing it. But he can still have a coach. So you can still have a coach for your writing without that seeming bad.

Drumm McNaughton 16:35

That makes perfect sense. One of the things that I've observed is that having faculty involved with advising is essential. When we look back at our college experience, if we think about the advisor we had or the faculty members we interacted with, it's always the faculty members.

Elliot Felix 16:57

Oh, yes. The faculty relationship is so crucial. I'm so glad you mentioned that because people often gravitate to staff who play an essential role when they think of student engagement or student support. But they can only play part of the role. The faculty play the other part. One of my favorite studies is from the Gallup-Purdue Index from eight or nine years ago. It found all these excellent correlations between what students did during college and their life after college. For example, students who had a mentor who encouraged them to pursue their dreams made them twice as likely to find meaningful and engaging work after graduation. It also made students twice as likely to think their education was worth the cost. So,

there are many reasons why faculty can drive student engagement and build these relationships. But just that one study alone is quite compelling.

Drumm McNaughton 18:02

It also leads to the last aspect we will discuss today, career readiness. It means everything to a student if they have faculty members who can advise them on which way to go by designing a course based on their goal from a backward perspective. What I mean by that is starting from their life and purpose to career and to major. What is most important is who is taking an interest in them and their gift, and telling them that this is where they should be going.

Elliot Felix 18:41

Yes. It does. And that same Gallup-Purdue Index study found that students who did internships are about twice as likely to be engaged at work after graduation and think that the education was worth the cost. Internships are one way of making that class-to-career connection, which is so important. It gives you a way to explore a career path and then a sense that you are progressing. It's like, "Oh, instead of doing this experiential learning project or an abstract marketing plan, I talked to a local nonprofit and did a marketing plan for them. I gained some real-world experience. My internship moved me along my path."

There are a lot of great institutions that are not seeing the career as separate from the coursework. They're trying to blend the two. Places like Tulane, Stanford, and ASU are doing exciting work with life design. Johns Hopkins created the Imagine Center, where career planning, life design, academic planning, and academic

advising are integrated. It's the same as that design ethos of holistically making those connections and thinking. That can be great.

My other favorite example is that CUNY's Guttman Community College has this great class called the Ethnographies of Work, where you shadow people whose jobs you might want to have in the future. So, now you possibly have a role model, or you can understand your path and work backward to understand how you can progress along it. So, building the class-career connections builds on support, which builds on a sense of belonging.

Drumm McNaughton 20:38

Those are three essential things. So to recap, belonging sets the foundation, but it's also the support for students and the career counseling that helps them transition out there. What else have you seen that works?

Elliot Felix 20:55

Providing support in an integrated, coordinated way, digitally and physically, can't be overlooked. Colleges and universities offer all these amazing services. But it doesn't matter if students don't know about them or can't get to them. Maybe they work during the day and can't come to the office between 9 am and 5 pm to sign a paper-based form? By the way, who wants to go anywhere to sign a paper-based form? Certainly not me, and not a working parent or adult learner. So, as colleges and universities progress from belonging to support to career, thinking about digital and physical one-stop shops is critical.

A great RAND report on the community college system found a 3% retention bump. We did a project at a university to create a new student portal, and they experienced a 3% retention bump after that. We've worked to redesign advising services to get personal academic career and financial support all in one place. We've also been doing a lot of work with libraries by reimagining them as student success hubs.

So, you meet students where they are. And while the student is there working on a paper or studying for a test, they can also go to the writing center, get a tutoring appointment, work in the stats lab, watch the presentation, or visit the communication center and polish things there. The integration, consolidation, and streamlining of support are crucial because college is getting complicated. It's getting harder and harder to navigate. In that complexity is also some redundancy and cost. It costs students, staff, and universities time and money.

Drumm McNaughton 22:44

These are all fascinating points. One thing that comes to mind is that student support and student services are the changing students' needs. A good number of [students are availing themselves of mental health](#). You must have those services there. If you're [looking at first-generation, Pell-eligible students](#), you must have different support services. One of the stories I love concerns how a friend of mine, President Dr. Russell Lowery-Hart of Amarillo College, had 99 of his students go homeless about two years ago. During one term, they only lost one student because they had already made the necessary arrangements with community services. They were able to help the students who felt comfortable enough to come in and say, "This is the issue." So, providing this one-stop shop for students is critical for what today's students have to go through.

Elliot Felix 23:47

It is. Maybe it's not a single stop. Sometimes that one-stop shop is a person. There's one person, Randi Harris, who runs the Transfer & Returning Student Resource Center at Portland State. He's one of our clients and somebody I interviewed for my book. She has this great quote: "We can't expect students to remember hundreds of different offices and centers where they should go. But we can't expect them to know one person and know them well enough to trust them to point them in the right direction. And, so, sometimes, the one-stop is a digital or physical place. But sometimes it's just the opportunity for a student to connect with a faculty, staff, or peer member, and that person is their go-to."

I believe that in that same ACHA-National College Health Assessment, more than a third of students have an anxiety diagnosis, and about a quarter have a depression diagnosis. And if there's one thing we see across college campuses, the mental health approach must be holistic. It can't be like, "This is a counseling center problem." It has to be everyone's problem and responsibility. You need an approach to do with peer relationships, belonging, and helping students build a support network of advisors, faculty, students, and RAs. You need a team approach.

Drumm McNaughton 25:26

Unfortunately, we've come to the end of our time. It always happens. What are three takeaways for university presidents and boards?

Elliot Felix 25:35

I love the opportunity to boil it down. We discussed how universities and colleges can integrate, consolidate, centralize, and coordinate their support. That's really important. There are things that students can do in the meantime. They can also work the problem from both ends.

Point number one is to help students understand that their college experience is more than just navigating and getting through it. It's something they can actively take ownership of. They can design and create their own experience. That's how they'll get the most out of it. If folks want to learn more about that, that's the title and thesis of my book, *How To Get The Most Out of College*. It takes all this research on student success and boils it down in one place. It's a one-stop shop.

The second point is not seeing the career and the classroom as disconnected. Create as many overlaps as possible through internships, real-world projects, service learning, externships, and alums coming into the classroom to discuss their path and journey. Maybe those alums end up needing interns that summer or winter.

The third point is the multimodal approach to understanding your students. Get in a rhythm of doing that research and assessment to understand and take the pulse of your students. Go broad and deep into who they are and what they need. How are those needs changing? And how are you doing? How are your spaces, services, systems, and staff doing relative to the needs of your community?

Drumm McNaughton 27:23

Those are great tips. What's next for you? You just mentioned your book.

Elliot Felix 27:29

Yes. It's called [How to Get the Most out of College](#). I have a [podcast](#) as well that goes by the same name. In each one, we unpack one of the tips and go into more detail about what to do, why, and how to do it for folks in higher ed, as well as students and parents. I like bridging those two worlds, understanding how colleges and universities work, and then trying to help students and parents make it work for them. People can check that out at [lefelix.com](#). That's where I have everything I've written and the interviews I've taken part in, like this one.

The other thing that's next is that we will keep doing great work, helping universities adapt and create more engaging, equitable, and sustainable experiences for their students, faculty, and staff. There are headwinds and challenges in higher ed. But it's so important to avoid the ed tech trope that higher ed is broken, and let's use this technology to fix it. I think about colleges and universities the way Winston Churchill thought about democracy. It's the worst except for all the others. I believe colleges and universities are remarkable places where they do game-changing research, provide transformative learning, and build communities. I want to be a part of helping colleges and universities adapt and continue to thrive and do so much good in the world.

Drumm McNaughton 29:05

Elliot, it's been a pleasure having you on the show, and I look forward to being on your show in a little while.

Elliot Felix 29:12

Absolutely. Take care.


Drumm McNaughton 29:14

Take care. Thank you. Thanks for listening today. I want to thank our guest Elliot Felix, CEO of Brightspot Strategy, for sharing his knowledge on how institutions can boost their enrollment and retention by improving the student experience.

Please tune in next week for my conversation with Dr. Kent Ingle, president of Southeastern University. Under Kent's leadership in the last 11 years, Southeastern has doubled its endowment, doubled the student body, added more than \$80 million in new facilities, and has been recognized by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* as one of the fastest-growing private nonprofit Baccalaureate institutions in the Country. Until next week, thanks for tuning in.

30:07

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