

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Why Relationships Matter in Higher Ed – Peter Felten to Keynote Caring Campus Conference 2025

LONG BEACH, CA – Dr. Peter Felten – Assistant Provost for Teaching and Learning, Executive Director of the Center for Engaged Learning, and Professor of History at Elon University – has spent his career championing the power of human connection in higher education. This November, he will bring his decades of research and insight to San Diego, Calif. as a keynote speaker at the inaugural Caring Campus Conference 2025: Building a National Culture of Care, taking place Nov. 12–14.

A nationally recognized scholar and author, Felten co-wrote “The Undergraduate Experience: Focusing Institutions on What Matters Most” in 2016. While the book explored numerous key drivers of student success, it was the chapter on relationships in particular that struck a lasting chord. The response led Felten and his colleagues to dig deeper, resulting in the acclaimed “Relationship-Rich Education: How Human Connections Drive Success in College” – a book grounded in interviews with 400 students, faculty, and staff across more than two dozen institutions.

“One of the questions we asked was about a meaningful interaction during their college experience,” Felten said. “Sometimes it was something as simple as a smile or being looked in the eye. The biggest thing I took away is that if we can help students see they’re more capable than they think they are, then we’ve succeeded. Everything else is extra.”

Felten’s research underscores a foundational truth: that relationships – whether with faculty, staff, or peers – are among the most powerful forces shaping student persistence and success. This is the same truth that drives the work of Caring Campus, which Felten first encountered when Caring Campus CEO and founder Dr. Brad Phillips reached out after reading “Relationship-Rich Education” in 2020.

“I was immediately impressed by the intentionality behind Caring Campus,” Felten said. “It’s not just about being kind. It’s a structured, evidence-based framework that’s attainable for every campus – large or small. Everyone can do this work, and it matters.”

At the conference, Felten will explore how relationship-rich practices can be scaled across campuses and embedded into daily interactions. His keynote will provide actionable strategies to cultivate connection and promote student agency, while also addressing the importance of faculty-student, staff-student, and peer-to-peer relationships.

“We often assume faculty are the only ones who matter in a student’s experience,” Felten said. “But in our interviews, students talked about custodians, librarians, advisors...everyone. Every interaction is an opportunity to affirm a student’s belonging, potential, and sense of purpose. Sometimes, those interactions are life-changing.”

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Felten will join fellow keynote speaker Dr. Vincent Tinto, a leading voice in student retention and success, along with approximately 35 presenters from across faculty, staff, administrative, and research roles. Sessions will be grounded in practical application, designed to empower attendees with strategies they can implement immediately on their campuses.

“I’m incredibly excited for the conference,” Felten said. “Events like this remind us of the importance of our work. You get to hear amazing stories from peers, see what’s possible, and leave feeling inspired and reenergized to create real change.”

Felten will bring a personal understanding of the power of education to the conference. Both of his parents were the first in their families to attend college, and Felten said they instilled in their children a deep belief that education can transform lives. Before joining Elon University, Felten taught at a community college, where the diversity of student experiences deepened his commitment to student-centered teaching.

“Dr. Felten’s work reflects the heart of Caring Campus – relationships matter,” Phillips said. “We are thrilled to welcome him as a keynote speaker at our inaugural conference. His message, grounded in both research and personal experience, reinforces what we know to be true – when we lead with care, students thrive.”

PHOTO CAPTIONS:

IEBC_FELTEN1: Dr. Peter Felten – Executive Director of the Center for Engaged Learning at Elon University – will bring his decades of research and insight to San Diego, Calif. as a keynote speaker at the inaugural Caring Campus Conference 2025: Building a National Culture of Care, taking place Nov. 12–14.

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