



The College Spy® Podcast with Michelle McAnaney

Episode 10

#10 From Campus Design to Experiential Learning: An Interview with Elliot Felix that Might Change How You Evaluate Potential Colleges

Welcome to The College Spy podcast, a podcast for parents and students addressing all aspects of the college selection and admissions process. I'm Michelle McAnaney, the founder of The College Spy. We offer college planning services to students and families across the United States and internationally. We are a team of dedicated educators who are committed to helping students and families identify the right colleges to apply to and get accepted. We offer our guidance and expertise in a way that improves student performance, increases confidence and promotes college readiness and maturity. The College Spy works with all students including students interested in the STEM fields, students with learning differences, international students, and third culture kids. To learn more about The College Spy, visit our website at TheCollegeSpy.com and follow us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#).

Welcome to episode ten of The College Spy Podcast. This episode includes my interview with Elliot Felix, author of *How to Get the Most Out of College*, The College Spy's Tip of the Day, and a college spotlight on Williams College. Elliott Felix is an author, speaker, teacher, father, and consultant to more than a hundred colleges and universities.

He uses his background in design to make college work for all students by improving the spaces they learn and live in, the support services they rely on, and the technology they use. Elliot is the author of “How to Get the Most Out of College”, where he provides insights about the college experience, and he shares stories and stats about the future of education.

His goal is always to help students better find their place, people, purpose, and path. And do it in a way that levels the playing field so colleges and universities work for all students. In this interview, Elliot and I discuss spaces on campus that prospective students can research to help them decide which colleges would be the best fit for them.

Michelle McAnaney:

Welcome to The College Spy Podcast. Elliot, I'm so glad to have you here.

Elliot Felix:

It's great to be here.

Michelle McAnaney:



Can you tell our listeners a little bit about your professional background and how you came to write "How to get the most out of college?"

Elliot Felix:

Well, my background is in design. I started off as an architect and I was working at a big firm. Building great buildings, but we didn't always know who we were designing for. So I went back to grad school at MIT and wanted to better understand the people I was designing for and had some luck doing that and learned a bit along the way. And then I found myself at this small consultancy that would write design briefs for buildings. So it was our job to go in and do the research, the interviews, the focus groups, the surveys, the competitive analysis and the benchmarking. And we would define the problem to be solved. We would understand a university or a college's goals, their vision, how they wanted to teach how they wanted students to learn, and we would distill that into a brief that the architect would then say, "Oh, great, now I know how to create a next generation library", or "I know how to expand this business school", or "I know how to create classrooms that are more engaging". And after doing that for about 5 years, I realized this process of talking to people and doing the research, running the numbers, it was great, but we only had 1 tool in the toolbox to help the university and that was to change or add space. And I thought there's really more to this because what we're designing isn't just space. It's someone's experience. And if we could help colleges and universities think about student services, think about technology, think about space, think about their financial model, then we could do a lot more good. And that was the premise behind founding Right Spot Strategy, which is a higher ed consultancy on a mission to create more engaging and equitable experiences for students. And I've been lucky enough to work with more than 100 of them.

Michelle McAnaney:

So, the universities were coming to the designers and architects and saying, this is what we need in order to teach, but it sounds like they weren't doing a fantastic job knowing what the students needed to learn, and to have a great experience on campus, and that's the piece you needed to add. Do I have that right?

Elliot Felix:

Yeah, I think they had some good ideas, but what would often happen is people would jump what happens a lot is people jump to the solution. They go to the architect and they say, I need this amount of space. And what we were saying is, "hold on a second, this amount of space for what, for who? How are they going to use it?" And so we were almost that translator between the students, the faculty, the staff who were teaching, we're learning, we're conducting research and the space that they needed and how it should be organized. And so we were able to translate 1 for the other. It wasn't maybe that the university didn't have great ideas about what they needed, they often just would jump to the solution without first defining the



problem. And after doing that for more than 100 colleges and universities, I realized I had learned a lot about how college works and what they offer. And I really wanted to share that with students and families directly, because I'm in it for the impact. I'm trying to help students succeed. And I can do that helping colleges create better faces, more responsive services, better technology, but I can also help students and families know what to expect and get the most out of it.

Michelle McAnaney:

And that's why you wrote the book.

Elliot Felix:

And that is why I wrote the book. Yes.

Michelle McAnaney:

I'm so glad that you're here to talk about this topic with us because I send a lot of students to visit colleges and to learn about them and they don't always know what they're looking for. And so your expertise is going to be really helpful to families to learn "when I'm looking at this college, I'm looking at the buildings, both on the outside and the inside, how should I be evaluating them?" And then also, which is what your book is really focused on, how do you get the most out of college when you're there?

Elliot Felix:

Yeah, absolutely. What's really a great thing about this is it's complicated and people have a lot of anxiety and they have a lot of fear and uncertainty. But what's great is that there is decades of research about what works that students and parents may not know about. So a lot of what I was trying to do in the book is say, of the hundreds of projects that I've done, and of the hundreds of studies that we're aware of, and we're referencing, and we're using, how can we distill that down into some practical tips that people can use for everything from where to live, to what to do a class project on, to how to do an internship, to everything in between.

Michelle McAnaney:

Talk to us a little bit about these spaces. So what I tell students to do is I want you to go into the library. You're going to go with the tour. They bring you to the library. They tell you things that kind of make you wonder like, "why do I need to know how many volumes?" and okay, the bottom floor is the quiet floor. And then it gets noisier as you go up or the other way around. What I tell them to do is I want you to sit down in the library after the tour, go sit there and think to yourself, would I be comfortable studying here? Would this be a good spot for me and what other spaces on campus might I utilize? Tell us a little bit about how you approach the topic of libraries.



Elliot Felix:

Well, I think it's a great question because libraries are undergoing a lot of change, and they are moving from places that were primarily about accessing and storing information, to also creating it. And getting support along the way, so a lot of our work with libraries is really about transforming libraries into hubs for creativity and support services for students. You think about college and there is this transformation going on from papers to projects. I like to think of it that way. It's just sort of a shorthand. And when you and I went to college, mostly we wrote papers and took tests and there's definitely still plenty of that going on, but there's a lot of students working on projects, working in teams, creating something, making presentations, making a prototype. And the great thing is that the next generation library is the students partner in those projects. So let's say you're working in a team to create a marketing plan for a community group. And you go to talk to them and you have some ideas. But when you go to a great campus library, they can help you with the research. "What are the trends?" "What are the big things that are happening for that?" Let's say it's a health care nonprofit. "What are the big things that are happening so they can help you with the research?" There's usually a writing center in the library that can help you with the writing like "what's your main idea?" "how do you how you're going to structure the argument?" There's often a statistics or a data lab that can help you analyze and visualize data for your plan and form your plan. "Which things are growing?" "Which are in decline?" Those kinds of things. There's often a communication center that can help you make a better presentation. They'll actually film you making your pitch, presenting your final presentation and give you feedback, lose the ums and the likes, for instance, or get to the point faster or go slower or divvy up the work and share the work better. Could be all these things. There's often a maker space in the library where you could make some kind of prototype 3d print something. There's support for tutoring for if you need help on the paper or the quiz or whatever it is. So libraries bring together all these different services. And there's also great data that basically, the more students use library resources, the more likely they are to graduate. It's 1 of my favorite topics. And I think it's almost like a microcosm for how much college has changed and how much they do to support their students.

Michelle McAnaney:

Is one of the problems that might be happening on a campus that has this new type of library, that the students just aren't using it? They don't know about it maybe?

Elliot Felix:

Well, I think there's different levels of usage, right? There is the person who sees the library in a very transactional way, and maybe they go there to check out a book or check out a laptop. And then maybe 1 tier up is, in addition to checking out a book or checking out a laptop, they'll study there. Right? And so the library is a place to study, meet friends. I need a quiet space. I



need a lively place. I want to be with my friends. That's maybe the next tier up. The next tier after that would be in addition to checking things in and out and studying, I'm actually going to use some of these services. I'm going to go to the writing center. I'm going to go to the communication center. I'm going to go to the maker space. I'm going to talk to an actual librarian about my research. The next stage is not only are you using those services, but you're building relationships. You actually know the librarian. You can go back to them and say, "Hey, I took your advice and here's what I, what do you think I should do next?" or go back to the writing coach or you go back to the maker space or you go back to the stats lab. So I think there's a lot of library usage, there's actually more than ever, but sometimes it's people using it more in that sort of transactional way, and there's opportunities for them to take more full advantage of everything it has to offer, because most libraries are filled with people that are just dying to help the students, but they may be tucked away in a corner. Maybe the students don't know about them. Maybe they don't feel like those services are for them. So I think a big thing that's happening with libraries is they're trying to make their services more visible, more accessible. Some of these services, there might be a misconception or like a stigma attached, like "Oh, I already know how to write, I'm not going to go to the writing center. Only people that are in a remedial English class that can't write a complete sentence, go to the writing center", but that's actually not the case. It's like the A students that love the writing center too, because they can go from an A to an A plus, right? Or they can polish even further.

Michelle McAnaney:

Sure. One of the things that happened to me near the beginning of my career, I was touring a lot of colleges everybody's heard of, right? As opposed to now I'm all about the hidden gems. And you go to places like Yale, Harvard, MIT, and they're telling you about tutoring and writing center and kind of thinking of course they want it to be just that much better and the work is harder for them too when they get to those schools. So what other spaces do you talk about in your book?

Elliot Felix:

There are a lot of great spaces that help with belonging and with support. So for instance, like living learning communities where you're in a residence hall that's organized around an identity, maybe it's a Latinx dorm or international student dorm, or around an idea like entrepreneurship or environmental sustainability. Those are really great spaces because studies show that students that are in living learning communities have a heightened sense of community. They're more comfortable taking risks. They actually have more contact with their professors outside of class, which is one of the key metrics. There's a longstanding 20 plus year survey called the National Survey of Student Engagement, NESTE. And one of their most telling indicators is how much and how frequently. Does a student have contact with a professor outside of the classroom. It's a great predictor of their or indicator of their success. So students who are in living learning communities tend to have more. So I think those are great spaces. I



think spaces like affinity group or identity group spaces, like a multicultural center, like a 1st gen center, like a student veteran center, like an LGBTQ+ center, pride center, those are also great spaces, I think, to find your people, to get that sense of belonging.

Michelle McAnaney:

In terms of living learning communities, some schools do a great job with this, and they have so many. For example, the University of Pittsburgh, I think, has 20 or more. And other schools, it's not a big thing on campus, or it doesn't exist. And I hear a lot of resistance or quietness coming from students when I talk to them about that. So think about the kid who's a junior going into senior year, and they're hearing about what their residence hall experience might be like, and learning that you can structure it to meet some of your needs or desires. And I'm telling them all the things you just said about why a living learning community might be a really good fit for them. And they're kind of thinking they don't want to do that. They don't want to engage in that. They'll say to me, I want my residence hall to be diverse. I want to meet all different kinds of people, not thinking about that they're going to experience that sense of belonging you talked about. And also all the other perks of a living learning community. Do you have any advice for students to engage with these services? And also they almost feel like amenities in some ways.

Elliot Felix:

Yeah, I understand that hesitation and a lot of it is like, "I don't want to limit myself before I know who I am or what my options are". I guess what I would say or what the research says is kind of two things. One is that your residence hall is only part of your community and there are lots of other ways to find community. There are lots of other ways to get involved, like clubs activities, student organizations, your campus job. So your residence hall is only 1 part of your 1 sphere of community. So even if you pick a specific living learning community, it's not like all your eggs are in that basket. And the other thing I would say is that just having a little bit of a focus gives you common ground and it sort of accelerates that sense of belonging because you all have at least something in common, whatever the theme is that the community is built around. And that doesn't mean that has to be the only way you find community, but it definitely gives you like a jumpstart the same way going to a student organization that could be about knitting, it could be about club lacrosse, it could be about chess, it could be about trivia, could be about sustainability, but when you show up, you all know that you've at least got that in common and it makes making friends easier. I think the same is true for a living learning community, but you don't want all your eggs in one basket for sure.

Michelle McAnaney:

I think that makes making friends easier as well. And 1 of the things that students really are worried about when they're headed to college is making friends and getting along with roommates. Sometimes I have a student spring of senior year trying to decide between 2 or 3



colleges. They've narrowed it down. And they can't make a decision. And I say, "what do you need to know about the campuses in order to decide? What do we need to find out?" So that we can go find it out. And oftentimes they say, "I want to know that I'm going to make friends and I'm going to like my roommate." They're afraid and they're heading into college. A lot of them not with this mindset of "what does this school have to offer? I'm going to dive into everything", but "oh, I feel a little afraid, it's not going to be okay." It's an interesting time for kids heading right into college.

Elliot Felix:

I think that's an expectation thing. I know our common friend, Andrew Malkin Brenner, has this great phrase that "you can be best roommates without being best friends". And I think that's another one of these things where students tend to put a lot of pressure and think, "Oh, my gosh, my roommate has to be my best friend." That's not really the case that may take a little bit of pressure off, but these are also things a good campus tour, a good visit, talking to students and also just like reflecting on the relationships they value today and seeing where they can find more of those.

Michelle McAnaney:

I want to switch gears for a second, because one of the things that you know about, and I want you to share with The College Spy audience, is about funding. Can talk a little bit about funding on campus and what that has to do with making the most out of your college experience and choosing a college.

Elliot Felix:

If I had to pick 1 thing that students can do to get the most out of their experience in college, it is really working on real world projects. Those are the projects where you work together on a team, you build skills, you end up with a project in your portfolio, you make an impact, and in the process, you become a more attractive applicant for an internship or a job. Students who work on what are commonly called service learning projects or civic engagement or community engagement projects like this, they get hired faster and at higher salaries. And what this has to do with funding, is that colleges and universities want students to do as many of these projects as possible. They may have lots of different terms. They might call it an experiential learning project, or they might call it an engaged learning project. Or they might call it civic engagement, or they might call it service learning. They provide a lot of support for these projects, mentoring, coaching, but also financial support. There's usually a center or several on campus that's all about helping students do these projects. The most useful thing is to do projects out in the world that let you apply what you're learning in the classroom, and then you can get them funded.



Michelle McAnaney:

I hear parents listening to you and they're saying, "how do I find out about that?". One of the things I've noticed about students is they really struggle with college research. And I think part of the problem is that college websites aren't built for the prospective student. They're built for several different types of people, right? Alumni, donors, the current students. So when students and parents go onto these websites, they get lost and they feel that they can't differentiate one college from another, and they find it difficult to find the information that they're looking for. Do you have any suggestions around how you might find out about this type of funding on campus and different projects? That a student might be able to participate in if they chose that school.

Elliot Felix:

I would start off by kind of short circuiting the college website and I would Google the name of the college and then service learning or experiential learning or civic engagement or leadership center. I think between those four terms and the university, it'll probably take you to whatever center they have on campus. If that doesn't work, you can use the search box on the campus website.

Michelle McAnaney:

Thank you so much for coming on The College Spy podcast. I am going to put in the show notes, a link to your book, a link to your podcast and where else can people get in contact with you?

Elliot Felix:

Well, I definitely like to share what I'm thinking through the podcast, but I write a lot of articles and give a lot of presentations at conferences and workshops with students, workshops with parent groups, workshops with colleges and universities. So folks can find all that at elliotfelix.com

Michelle McAnaney:

Thanks, Elliot.

Several times each year, The College Spy offers a course for parents called College Admissions 101. The course is live, interactive and online. In the course, you'll gain the knowledge and confidence to guide your student through the college admissions process. We meet four times over Zoom, where you will hear an engaging and informative presentation and have the opportunity to ask questions that pertain to your child's situation.

Throughout the course, we will examine these topics closely:

How to build a college list that best fits your child.



How to research colleges to fully understand what they have to offer.
How to choose between the SAT, the ACT, or whether to apply test optional.
The college application timeline.
College application strategies for success.
And an overview of financial aid.

I pack a lot of information into these four sessions. If you're interested in joining the next College Admissions 101, you can register at TheCollegeSpy.com/coursesandcamps/College-Admissions-101

The College Spy's tip of the day:

Many students don't realize that they can list hobbies on their college application. The Common application provides space to list extracurricular activities. And many students believe that these extracurricular activities need to be formal activities that are associated with school or perhaps their community. But what colleges are really interested in is how students spend their time. And if your student spends a lot of time with a hobby that's important to them, they should list it on their college application.

Today's college spotlight is on Williams College.

Williams College is a highly selective, small liberal arts college located at the foothills of the Berkshire Mountains. In the postcard worthy Williamstown, Massachusetts. Spring Street is the main thoroughfare and begins in the middle of campus. It's a small stretch of shops, restaurants, and the Images Cinema, an historic movie theater that shows classic, independent, and foreign films. In addition to Williams College, Williamstown is known for its Tony Award winning theater festival and the Clark Art Institute. The campus is a quintessential New England college. Historic buildings, classic New England architecture, church steeples, tree lined pathways, and open quads.

Williams students choose a major from 35 options, the most popular of which are economics, history, political science, and biology. In addition, Williams is known for strong programs in studio art, art history, and environmental science. In lieu of a minor, undergraduates choose a concentration, which consists of courses pulled from several departments and disciplines. Classes are small, with a faculty to student ratio of 7 to 1. Although the academics are rigorous, Williams is a supportive and nurturing environment.

Diversity and equity are valued at Williams. Of the 1,900 undergraduate students, 46 percent are white, 54 percent receive financial aid, and 20 percent qualify for Pell Grants. There is a need blind admissions process, which means students are judged solely on their merits, regardless of their ability to pay tuition. As of 2022, Williams has pledged to meet 100 percent of financial need for its students, eliminating all loans and work study obligations. It is one of a



few colleges in the country that provide free textbooks and course materials to all students receiving financial aid. One of Williams' missions is to provide opportunities for all students to thrive through programs working to eradicate racial and socioeconomic disparities in higher education.

On-campus housing is guaranteed to all students for four years, and 93 percent of students live on campus. There is designated freshman housing, upperclassmen living a combination of large traditional dorms and smaller buildings with anywhere from 12 to 100 residents. One way to get involved and meet new people is to join one of the over 100 clubs and organizations. Registered Student Organizations, or RSOs, have many focuses, including academics, sports, and the arts. Established in 1898, Caps and Bells is the oldest student-run theater group in the country. Students are encouraged to start an RSO if they don't find one that piques their interest.

Weekend social life at Williams does not include a college bar scene or fraternity parties, as Greek life is non-existent. Most parties center around athletics, performing arts, and cultural affinity groups. There are many opportunities for outdoor activities, including hiking, skiing, and cycling. Williams would be a good fit for a student who is looking for a quiet, intimate, and intellectual environment without the amenities of a larger town or city.

Some interesting facts about Williams College:

It was founded in 1793 through funds bequeathed by Colonel Ephraim Williams.

There is no core curriculum or required courses. Students are able to choose which courses they will take to fulfill their general course requirements.

The school mascot is the purple cow, and the sports teams are referred to as Fs, named for Colonel Ephraim Williams.

Women were first admitted to Williams in 1970.

And every October, students participate in Mountain Day, hiking Mount Greylock. They are met with hot cider and donuts when they reach the summit.

Famous alumni include President James Garfield, Stephen Sondheim, George Steinbrenner, and William Bennett.

The College Spy interviewed a current F, and here are the answers to our questions.

What is the best kept secret on campus? *The hot tub in the 62 Center.*

Describe a typical student at your school in under 10 words. *Definitely a nerd in at least one way.*

What do most students do on weekends to have fun? *Some people go to Hoxie Street for big parties, but at this point, I tend to hang out with my friends from various clubs. Many of the businesses within walking distance close by 11 p. m., so most events are hosted in dorms. There are also many events hosted by the office of campus life and by different clubs and groups on campus.*



the college spy
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