John Schuh’s chapter on assessing first-year programs and “other student experiences” provides a valuable overview of assessment—how it is appropriately defined and structured. Included in this chapter are two case studies as examples of typical assessment projects.

The book concludes with three chapters on “cutting-edge approaches.” Christopher Poirier and Robert Feldman’s chapter about online instruction in the first year takes a broad look at the prevalence of distance learning, the advantages and disadvantages of both online and traditional courses, and concludes with the authors’ experience in teaching a “freshman seminar” course online at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Although Poirier and Feldman recognize the value of online instruction, they are candid in acknowledging both strengths and weaknesses of this instructional method. The chapter authored by Joni Petschauer and Cindy Wallace of Appalachian State University details the various programs and activities focused on the first year at this award-winning institution, programs and activities that lead to enhanced student engagement. Finally Jodi Levine Laufgraben offers a brief but thorough summary of the learning community as an effective structure for first-year instruction. Laufgraben reviews current learning community models and provides recommendations for adapting learning communities to any campus environment.

This book is a valuable addition to the available literature on the first year. Although at just over 200 pages it is less comprehensive than other recent books on the first year, (e.g. Challenging and Supporting the First-year Student, Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot, 2005), the topics selected for inclusion are important for consideration not only by educators who work directly with first-year students, but also by those who determine educational policy at the institutional, state, and national levels.

REFERENCE

From School to a Career: A Student’s Guide to Success in the Real World
John R. Jell
Lanham, MD: ScarecrowEducation, 2005, 96 pages. $10.95 (softcover)
Reviewed by Scott C. Brown, Mount Holyoke College

The stated objective of this book is to provide high school and college students with a practical roadmap to be successful in the real world. This slim volume is meant to be a guide to this journey, and is organized into seven chapters: “What do You Want to Do in the Future?”; “What Employers Are Looking For”; “The Importance of Balancing Formal and Informal Learning”; “The Role of Degrees, Grades, and Experience Come Graduation”; “Getting Relevant Experience by Investing Time”; “Getting Focused on Your Future”; and, “Going to College and Education Costs.” Each chapter has a summary and a basic application piece, and Jell uses anecdotes and simple diagrams to keep things lively.

He pitches this to all high school and college students, but this audience is too broad. There is much press about the anxieties of college-bound students of not just getting into college, but getting into the “right” college. These are the savvy students that have grown up in an environment with coaches and tutors providing ways to give advantage in the college process. This book is not for them. This book will be a bit too simplistic and obvious (e.g., internships are important), and some of the bromides and platitudes may seem a bit clichéd or cloying.
Jell does not say this outright, but this book is best suited for students who are most likely first-generation college students or are not in an educational environment that has a great deal of resources, expectations or systems in place that typically support college-bound students. For example, he makes the case why a college degree is important, which seems that the intended audience is not necessarily familiar with the benefits of a college education. He also identifies how the home or personal context can constrain the benefits of college, again hinting that the reader may not have a home environment that is necessarily supportive or understanding of the college experience.

There are a number of books that have addressed students’ transition to college and beyond. Other books treat the issues much more comprehensively. For example Career By Design: Communicating Your Way To Success (Hanna, 2005), and Job Hunting Guide: Transitioning from College to Career (Krannich & Krannich, 2003) both address self-assessment, the tools to obtain work (e.g., resumes, cover letters, networking, etc.), with a great deal more supporting research and resources, websites, involved personal exercises and are presented in a much more exhaustive and slick fashion. From College to Career is different because it is designed to help the tentative and the largely less-informed student navigate the basic steps of this uncertain process. It strips down the process to its most basic steps to help jump-start this path, removing all but the most essential information to get started. Its more no-frills look may be less attractive to some audiences, but this presentation may be less overwhelming and intimidating for the tentative student.

The book’s strength is its plucky, scrappy, boot-strapping spirit. It is hard not to like Jell’s earnest and sincere interest in helping young people. It is hard to dissociate the book’s content from the author. This book is an impassioned plea from an ardent believer, short on research but long on lessons learned from the School of Hard Knocks. He makes a clear case of why students need to buckle down and maximize their college years. Although the first person perspective is sometimes distracting, his intended audience will care a great deal about his personal story, which is a source of authority. Jell offers himself as the savvy, caring, straight-talking big brother you wish you had or a personal guidance counselor in your hands. He talks with great candor about his family difficulties in a way that sets an effective context as to how to transcend them. The tone is incessantly upbeat and empowering. It is no wonder he is a motivational speaker, and would be particularly adept with first-generation college students or less guided students.

This book has several small weaknesses. First, as a career services professional, I take a bit of umbrage how this entire book barely mentions a career center in any form (and I would quibble with the way his college resume is formatted!) Additionally, as a professional at a liberal arts college, I cringed when Jell spoke admiringly of the advice of his father: “If you want to get into the business world, do you think it would be better to have a business degree or a history degree? At least study business. If you don’t get into law school, it will be much stronger to fall back on.” You know what? He was right!” (p. 40). There is a very strong vocational tinge to the whole book that gives learning for the sake of learning short shrift. But again, the implicit audience for this book would be less swayed by that argument anyway, as it will seem frivolous and not justify the outlay of time and effort for such an abstract and ephemeral outcome.

Jell wants this to be one of the most
important books students read. In the right hands it will be very important. This engaging guide is part pep talk and part cautionary tale and should be in the hands or on the shelves of first-generation or less coached college-bound students.

REFERENCES


Death by Meeting: A Leadership Fable...About Solving the Most Painful Problem in Business

Patrick M. Lencioni
San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2004, 272 pages, $22.95 (hardcover)

Reviewed by Gregory J. Nayor, Lynchburg College

Increasingly, leaders in the area of student affairs administration are being called upon to shape the “institutional priorities that affect student learning and development” (Dungy, 2003, p. 355). In order to do so, the ability to lead and manage the human resources within colleges and universities becomes ever more crucial and will require even greater skills (Dalton, 2003). It seems inevitable that these leaders will struggle with a problem that administrators and CEOs alike have continued to share: how to effectively design a staff meeting and facilitate it in a manner that produces thought, interest, and a shared sense of purpose. Designing and leading staff meetings are precisely the area that best-selling author Patrick Lencioni discusses in his latest work, Death by Meeting. The selection is aimed at business executives, but the parallel between corporate America and student affairs administration is striking. And while this is not a book that has all of the answers or even a prescription that will work for all staffs (nor is it billed as one), Lencioni’s interpretation of the staff meeting and the inherent problems therein creates a thought provoking work that will cause leaders and managers to rethink their current methods.

Described as a “leadership fable,” Death by Meeting shares the story of fictional Casey McDaniel, the owner of Yip Software, a company he has built from the ground up. Despite a steady profit line, a competent employee base, and national recognition, the organization wallows in mediocrity caused in large part by the ineffectiveness of the executive team’s weekly staff meetings. No one dares challenge the conventional, fruitless meetings until the company becomes part of a larger corporation, Playsoft, and Casey’s job is on the line. While the bulk of this work is a story, the author makes it clear through his descriptions of the people and the organization that this fictional executive team and its ineffective meetings could be any organization. Readers will note this connection and begin drawing examples from their own experiences.

It has been estimated that due to the nature of their work, nearly 59% of managers’ time is spent in planned meetings, and another 10% in spontaneous meetings (Davis, 2003). Add in the element of shared governance that the college environment nurtures, and that estimate can be considered conservative (Birnbaum, 1988). Lencioni points out in his work that the people at Yip Software underestimated the significant impact that ineffective and dreadful meetings could create for an organization and how the organization’s culture is actually derived from those meetings. Yip’s weekly two hour meeting suffered from the general malaise that occurs in many