

THE METRONOME

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Building Professional Relationships in College

Website: <https://the-metronome.ghost.io/>

Cover Image: Wilhelm Wundt (seated) with colleagues in his psychological laboratory, the first of its kind / Public Domain

Editor's Note

Welcome to Issue 2, which is all about building professional relationships in college. As with Issue 1, this edition of *The Metronome* wouldn't have existed without the contributions of the following psychological professionals:

Experts in This Issue

- Dr Amy Smith, Chief Scientist at Blank Slate Technologies in New Haven, Connecticut
- Dr Kripa Sundar, Founder and Lead Consultant at EdTech Recharge in Irvine, California
- Mr Jared Peterson, Founder at Behavior Change Expert and Researcher at ShadowBox Training
- Dr Jennifer Talarico, Professor of Cognitive Psychology at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, USA

I'm extremely grateful for their time and insights. This magazine couldn't have existed without their generosity. You can read more about each of them in detail at the end of this pdf.

I hope you find this issue of *The Metronome* useful. If you know anyone who would benefit from reading it, kindly share this issue with them.

To read the *The Metronome* online and want to receive future issues directly in your inbox, sign up at <https://the-metronome.ghost.io>

Before you go...

If you have any questions about studying psychology or making a career in the field, please send them on the form provided at <https://the-metronome.ghost.io/issue-1/> so that I can include them in a future issue. At least 5 different experts would be answering it, so everyone would benefit.

Until the next issue,

Ratika Deshpande

Editor

The Metronome

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Building Professional Relationships in College

'Tis a truth universally acknowledged that people need people. More specifically, college students need a variety of people to grow personally and professionally.

But where do you start? What if you hate small talk or are scared of approaching strangers? How do you know which people can help you? And how do you overcome the idea that networking means using people for your own benefit?

For the second issue of *The Metronome*, I reached out to four experts with diverse backgrounds in psychology with these questions. Here are their tips on navigating the challenges of building professional relationships in college:

The Benefits of Networking in College

When it comes to building professional relationships, connecting with faculty members can benefit students not only during their time in college but also after they've completed their studies, according to Dr Jennifer Talarico, Professor of Cognitive Psychology at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, USA.

There are several reasons to connect with your professors, beyond clarifying any doubts about the coursework and seeking

feedback on assignments. “[I]f there's a topic in class that sparks your interest, the faculty member can often point you in the direction of additional resources to deepen your understanding,” explains Dr Talarico.

Professors can suggest specific keywords to help you find readings that are relevant to your area of interest. They can also, “through conversations about your interest, point you in the direction of other related coursework that might not be immediately obvious to you,” Dr Talarico says. “So, for instance, I will often point my students to coursework in Economics or in Sociology or in Government or in Public Policy—things that are [...] related to Psychology but might be particularly of interest to a student who's interested in shaping behavior through marketing or how we use public monuments to shape memory or how we can [...] employ the science of learning to shape education policy or how misinformation can disrupt healthcare policy.”

Faculty members can also take up the role of mentors, Dr Talarico suggests. “You might develop a relationship where you could play a role in assisting with their research or maybe they could supervise an independent study project of yours.”

In addition, they can recommend people you can connect with, exposing you to “different options for what you can do with a psychology degree that you might not have thought of that might align well with your interests,” says Dr Talarico.

Strategies for Networking in College

Building professional relationships in college begins with “adopting professional behavior, even among classmates,” says Dr Kripa Sundar, Founder and Lead Consultant at EdTech Recharge in Irvine, California. According to her, college is “a great place to get started practicing building professional relationships; your friend today can be a colleague or referral later.”

She suggests that students should “[t]reat college like work, not school. If it's not behavior you intend to engage in at work, then don't do it in college. [...] Attend fests and competitions with this mindset.”

Take a Focused Approach

With the mindset nailed down, where do you start? Dr Amy Smith, Chief Scientist at Blank Slate Technologies in New Haven, Connecticut, suggests that “students avoid casting too wide a net when trying to build relationships. Networking events with hundreds of people may be a great way to meet a lot of people but aren't a great way to build deep and meaningful connections.” She suggests two approaches you can take instead:

- “First, pour yourself into one or two longer-term opportunities like a job or an internship. Spend a lot of time with the people there, show them how hard you work and how reliable you are, and make them happy to have known

you. You'll need their recommendation as you pivot to the next stage of life.”

- “Second, make an effort to get close to your favorite professors. If you really enjoy a class you're taking, talk to the professor after class and visit them in their office hours. Ask them if they have opportunities for you to get more involved in their area of study and take them up on any offers. You'll need their support for your next job, internship, or grad-school application.”

Make Use of Office Hours

All the experts I interviewed for this issue put particular emphasis on reaching out to professors. Dr Talarico recommends making good use of professors' office hours, which are “open hours set aside during the week that are specifically reserved for students to come in and have just drop in, no appointment necessary.” Instead of having a plan or agenda, “students should take advantage of that sort of invitation to come in and just start a conversation.”

“Introduce yourself [...] tell them what other classes you're taking that semester, what classes you've taken previously, what drew you to psychology,” suggests Dr Talarico, and points out that students should also reach out to professors from other departments. “[I]f there's someone working in an area that you haven't had the opportunity to take a class with, but you know that they teach a class that you're interested in, there's nothing stopping you from going to their office hours and having a brief conversation with them during that time.”

Dr Sundar recommends that students should also “[s]pend additional time with faculty on projects that [you] can start showcasing as your portfolio.”

Alumni Associations and Career Services Centers

Other than faculty members, students can also reach out to “alumni associations, career services centers, [and] other student support services on campus,” says Dr Talarico.

Meet them during their office hours, send an email, or attend any events they organize. “These people want to meet you,” she says, so students should reach out “even when it's a little intimidating or even when it's a little awkward, or even when you're not exactly sure what you

want to say or you don't have a particular goal in mind.”

Dr Talarico emphasized how important it is to approach “people where they are *as people*, and then having a relationship developed from there.”

The kind of people you connect with doesn't have to be limited by the college you attend. “A college student often has the benefit of being able to reach out to any leading professional and ask for informational interviews or feedback on your work portfolio,” says Dr Sundar. “When doing so, prep for the meeting: learn about their company, the type of role, are they the right person to ask for feedback (not too high nor immediate graduate) and ask targeted questions to learn more about possible areas of growth and opportunity.”

“Names are so important” - Mr Jared Peterson's Tips on Remembering People

Mr Jared Peterson, Founder at Behavior Change Expert and Researcher at ShadowBox Training, emphasizes the need to remember people's names:

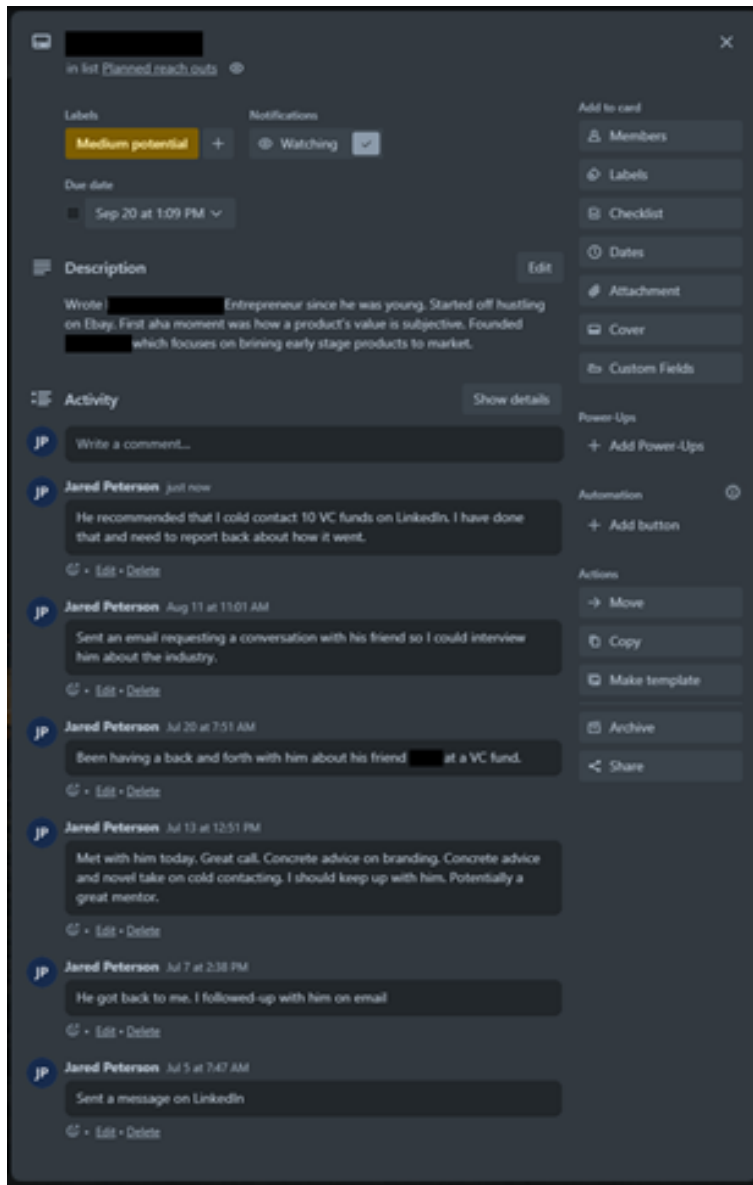
Keep track of names. Names are so important. Keep them in a notepad on your phone with some details so you remember who they are. Go over the list occasionally so you don't forget the names. If you haven't talked to one of the names in a while, reach out.

My notepad got too long, and I now use Trello to keep track of people I want to remember to reach out to. There I can keep track of the last time we spoke, what we spoke about, and when I want to reach out again.

Here is a “card” from my Trello board. This is a business contact who I am hoping might be able to provide business – most likely through his friend at a VC fund. But I am ranking that opportunity as “medium potential” and am thinking I should rank it even lower – nothing has happened in a month!

However, despite the low business opportunity, I am still interested in staying in contact since he has proven to give good advice. I am planning on reaching out next week (Sept

20th) to report back on some advice he gave me. This has nothing to do with him providing business opportunities, and everything to do with him generously offering advice, and me wanting to report back to him that I took his advice seriously and am thankful for it.



You can see I have a short description of who he is to help jog my memory, and also a chronicle of our conversations. Nothing too in-depth, but enough so that I am never embarrassed that I can't remember what we talked about.

Other people on my Trello don't have a color indicating their business potential because they are just friends or people I want to remember to reach out to because I like them or find them interesting. The point of my Trello board isn't to rank people in terms of what I can get out of them, but rather, to serve as a prompt and database to help me stay in contact with people. Relationships need maintenance, and if I don't keep track of those relationships, I'll forget to do that maintenance.

What Sort of People Should Students Connect With?

“My master’s program was at an Ivy League, and it occurred to me early on that the chief value of an Ivy League was not the education, but the network,” says Mr Peterson. “So when I arrived [at] the program, my goal was to get to know everyone.”

Connecting with *everyone* can be daunting, however. “My advice is this; don’t aim for a number – just always be meeting new people,” Mr Peterson says. “I made lots of friends this way.”

If that’s still too broad an approach, Dr Smith suggests identifying your goals and then proceeding from there:

- “If you know exactly what you want to do after college, connect with anyone and everyone who can help you get there. For example, if you want to go to dental school after college, stop in to local dentist’s offices and ask if they are hiring interns or would allow a student to job shadow for a semester.”
- “If you don’t know what to do after college, start anywhere. Get a job or an internship that you find moderately interesting. Talk with a professor who teaches a class that you love.”

“Once you get a foot in the door with someone,” says Dr Smith, “nurture that relationship and see where it goes.”

She adds: “There isn’t a clear path for most people in life, most people are

working jobs that they just sort of stumbled upon and ended up enjoying. So let yourself stumble around, but when you find something you enjoy, give it your all and impress the crap out of the people around you.”

“My only regret is that I wish I had reached out to more professors,” says Mr Peterson.” Not the famous professors who are unlikely to give me the light of day. But the ones that roll their eyes at those famous professors and are doing the actual work. It is a sign of respect that you reached out to them, and they will shower you with wisdom, advice, and will provide you [with] connections.”

Dr Talarico emphasizes again the benefits of reaching out to student services centers on campus—and to do so at the *beginning* of college. “It’s not about just before you graduate and you’re thinking about that first job but *early*,” she says. “They can help you with internships; they can help you with summer jobs; they can help you with informational interviews for people [...] working in fields that may be of interest to you.”

Connections with alumni can be equally useful, says Dr Talarico. “These are people who were where you are now, and are maybe where you hope to be.” On your request, alumni can also introduce you to people in their network, especially “individuals who may have something in common with you or from whom there might be a mutually beneficial relationship.”

How Large Should Your Network Be?

Is there a specific number of people that students should aim to connect with? The experts I interviewed don't think so.

“[W]e're multifaceted people and we're often interested in different topic[s],” says Dr Talarico, who describes how varied her network is. “I might have members of my professional network that I go to because we have very similar scholarly interests and we might collaborate on research projects or I might send my undergraduate students to work to get their PhD with that student.”

Then there are the professionals who work at similar places but in a different field. “And so, we might talk about teaching or we might talk about administrative challenges or things like that.” Finally, professionals whose work resembles her own help her understand “a different way of applying the work that I do.”

Dr Talarico summarizes it thus: “[W]e're not all *one* thing [...] different people have different strengths and we have different points of commonality. [...] I think everybody probably has something that they can contribute to your growth.”

Shallow and Deep Relationships

But it's important to avoid a situation where you know a lot of people at a “very very shallow level.” Dr Talarico recommends keeping it balanced: have shallow and medium relationships as well as deep ones where “you can go to [them]

with a lot of different questions or problems or challenges or opportunities.”

But if having a number to aim for would help, Dr Smith has a suggestion: “If you finish college with 3–5 professionals who you've managed to woo into writing you letters of recommendation, you're in a good place. So if you need a rule, keep trying to connect with people until you reach that goal of 3–5 very solid connections.”

“[The k]ey to remember is it's not the number of people you know as much as the number of people who would be willing to go on a limb/chat/refer/trust you,” says Dr Sundar. “Think of it this way: you can have 600+ Facebook friends but you are most likely going to call on the 6 closest ones when you need help or celebrate. When you're building connections, focus on building strong, sustainable connections.”

Common Networking Struggles and Their Solutions

“In social settings, I am often the person in the back of the room at a table by myself, uncertain about what to do,” says Mr Peterson when talking about his struggles with networking. “But over time I have learned to be a little more bold and just say, “[I]s it alright if I join the conversation?” No one ever says no.”

He adds: “If the conversation is boring or too personal for me to know what is going on, I just say, “It was nice meeting you all. I'm going to explore a bit and meet some more people.” No one cares.

Oftentimes my leaving spurs others to leave as well, and I will get to meet them again later in a different group.”

It takes time, however, to work up the nerve to join conversation with strangers.

“I’m an introvert with social anxiety, so I’ve always struggled with approaching new people and introducing myself,” says Dr Smith. “I can’t say I’ve ever overcome that, but there are some things that help.”

According to the [American Psychological Association’s Dictionary of Psychology](#), social anxiety refers to the “fear of social situations in which embarrassment may occur (e.g., making conversation, meeting strangers, dating) or there is a risk of being negatively evaluated by others (e.g., seen as stupid, weak, or anxious). Social anxiety involves apprehensiveness about one’s social status, role, and behavior. When the anxiety causes an individual significant distress or impairment in functioning, a diagnosis of [social phobia](#) may be warranted.”

Preparing for Meetings and Conversations

One strategy for converting cold meetings—where you’re talking to someone you’ve never contacted before—into warm ones is to get support from the people you already know.

“Whenever possible, I ask someone I know to introduce me to the stranger that I want to meet, and I research the crap out of them before I meet them,” says Dr Smith, who also has other strategies to make such conversations easier. “I also prepare a lot for my first meeting with someone,” she says. “[S]ometimes I even write out a script of my first few talking points. This probably sounds outrageous to a self-confident extrovert, but the introverts will be nodding their heads.”

looks at my notebook of call notes

nods

Building Genuine Relationships

But is it really possible to put in so much work for every conversation?

“One thing I struggle with is balancing the time it takes to build authentic connections and knowing whom to connect with,” says Dr Sundar. “I overcome this by connecting with people whom I genuinely enjoy speaking with/learning from/have alignment in overall goal/vision. This has made building and sustaining those connections much easier for me.”

Many people seem to be able to build networks of hundreds of people but Dr Sundar says that she’s “not great at connecting for connection[’s] sake.”

There are also other factors one needs to consider: “Another element, particularly as a working woman, is recognizing my emotional/mental/physical safety and bandwidth,” she says.

Being Deliberate and Intentional

“[B]uilding and maintaining relationships has to be intentional,” says Dr Talarico. “We are all so busy with the things that are immediately in front of us.”

This is why, she emphasizes, it’s important to “[set] aside time and [be] very intentional and very deliberate about checking in [and] connecting with colleagues.” She does this by reaching out via email after a conference or wishing fellow professors a good start to the academic year. These little emails help her stay in touch “so that if a more serious or more significant sort of opportunity arises, like, “Hey, I have this research proposal idea and you would be a perfect fit for it.” My reaching out to talk with you about that project isn’t the first time you’ve heard from me in five years.”

This doesn’t mean, however, that “every contact has to be [...] a 300-word missive on what you’ve been doing and things like that,” says Dr Talarico. “It’s enough to just maintain that connection and keep those channels of communication open.”

What People Get Wrong About Building Relationships

“Networking is sometimes seen as a dirty word. Get over that.” says Mr Peterson. “Both your professional success and personal happiness depend on developing relationships, and both can be developed in the same way – reaching out to people

you think are interesting and getting to know them better.”

Networking may seem like a strategic game of give-and-take, but according to all the experts I interviewed, it’s more about taking an interest in people. “Networking is just the way rich people say, “making friends,”” says Mr Peterson.

He explains, “Most networking is not an exchange of business cards, but just getting to know someone sufficiently that you would both feel comfortable enough to reach out to each other for something. Feeling comfortable [...] enough to forward an article you found that is related to a conversation you had. Comfortable enough to ask for advice.”

“The goal of networking isn’t to get something out of someone,” Mr Peterson adds. “The goal is to develop a relationship. That relationship can never form if you are just trying to exploit them, and it cannot be maintained if you let it lapse for too long.”

Effort Matters More Than Time

“People sometimes think that putting in the time will build the relationship,” says Dr Smith when talking about common misconceptions about networking. “As a professor, I had a lot of students ask me for letters of recommendation after they had taken two or three of my classes. I didn’t even remember some of these students because they had never talked to me outside of class or showed interest in my course beyond completing their assignments.”

She adds that effort matters more: “Simply showing up — to work, to class,

to practice, etc. — is not enough. You have to converse with people, show interest in them, offer to help them with something, express interest in doing more. That's how you build real relationships.”

Dr Sundar agrees: “I appreciate people who show they have done their homework, present what the connection point is, and an inkling of how much this relationship will take from me (occasional chat vs mentoring vs work).”

Effort on your end makes things easy for the person you're reaching out to. “Most people send superfluous messages saying they like my work/find [my] profile interesting and [ask to] connect [but] this makes it really hard for me to connect,” says Dr Sundar.

Networking Shouldn't Be Transactional

“I think it's a tricky thing, because when we talk about professional relationships [...] there's a temptation for it to be transactional,” explains Dr Talarico. ““I want something for you. I will give you something in return.””

However, not being transactional doesn't mean forgetting that these connections are professional. “[Y]ou don't want to unnecessarily blur those lines, but we're all people. Just because I'm wearing my professional hat doesn't mean I'm not a person,” says Dr Talarico. “[I]t's more, “I like you, you're interested in the same things. Let's see how we can do something together or help each other out or [...] just help the field generally.””

This approach has resulted in long-term friendships and professional relationships for Dr Talarico. “I'm proud

to say I have professional colleagues that I've known for 20 years. [But] they're not friends in the same way that my best friend from when I was a kid is my friend [...] friendship has many different dimensions. [That's] something to be aware of,” she adds.

What to Do If You Struggle With Small Talk

“Most people struggle with small talk, so just remember that the person you're talking to is probably also struggling,” says Dr Smith.

Questions to Help You Break the Ice

One way to make things easier is to remember that “people usually don't mind talking about themselves,” explains Dr Talarico and suggests questions you could ask your conversation partner. “[Ask] questions that don't have a yes or no answer. [For example,] “What are you most looking forward to this semester?” or “Oh, do you have anything on the horizon that you're particularly excited about?””

She recommends “keeping things positively oriented, asking [...] about interests.” Here are some sample questions:

- “What is it about this project that is interesting to you?”
- “How did you get involved in that?”
- “Where do you see this going next?”

“[T]hose kinds of questions that can build and deepen a conversation are usually productive,” Dr Talarico explains and adds that you must also be “open to sharing those same things about yourself. [A] good conversation partner will return the favor and ask you [...] what you're looking forward to or what you're excited about.” Such openness is generally beneficial, she suggests.

What if such questions don't come to mind easily?

“My trick for initiating small talk is to pretend I'm interviewing the other person until I find something that we have in common that we can dive deeper on,” explains Dr Smith. “Have a list of things you can ask them: Where are they from? What do they study or do for work? How crazy was that heat/storm/freeze we had last week? The conversation will go somewhere interesting more quickly than you think.”

Understanding Your Conversation Partner

Mr Peterson focuses all his efforts on understanding his conversation partner. “Everyone has passions and interests, and my goal in most conversations is to figure out what that passion is. I don't care if it is something nerdy, something academic, or something popular – if someone is passionate about something, they will have a lot to say about it.”

He adds, “When someone is able to feel that you are not judging them for their passion, but genuinely interested in what interests them, they open up and conversation comes easy. Of course, I would love to talk about the subjects I am most interested in, but in the end, it is just fun to hear someone talk about something they are passionate about, and the comfort of friendship naturally results from that.”

“Know yourself and be yourself.” - Dr Kripa Sundar's Tips on Overcoming Small Talk Struggles

- **Know yourself and be yourself.** Prep an elevator pitch for yourself.
- Go on a date with yourself - what are the things you want people to know about you in professional settings? Whom do you want to connect with? Why?
- First impressions matter but are not a done deal. Give people second chances and ask for them too.
- Don't pressurize yourself to connect with every single person you meet. Mind your own emotional and mental capacity; recognize the toxicity if you feel it.

Building Professional Relationships: Quick Tips

Dr Amy Smith: If all of this relationship-building stuff scares you, I have two fairly easy pieces of advice: find yourself a great mentor, and say yes to every professional opportunity that comes your way. Not sure who your mentor is? They might be a professor, a high school teacher, a family member, a coworker, or your romantic partner. A mentor is someone who genuinely wants the best for you and will push you out of your comfort zone to help you achieve it. I'm sure you have one, or at least have someone in your life who would like to take on that role. As for seizing every opportunity, you are offered way more opportunities than you realize. If you're a student, you probably have 10 new opportunities in your email inbox every week. Read those emails, reach out to event organizers and labor seekers, and DO STUFF!

Dr Kripa Sundar: Networking can take you far but see connections as a foot in the door. To walk, you need the muscle of substance. Do not substitute substance with connections. Think long-term. Integrity, professionalism, and work quality go a far distance in my experience --> especially for those who are under-represented or introverted. Quality work begets more work and success. The best connections in the world won't hold you up without substance in the long run (my personal opinion/life philosophy). Be someone you would want to refer.

Dr Jennifer Talarico: I think my only other tip would be [to] put yourself out there. It's intimidating [...] I don't mean to minimize that but [...] most people want to connect with people.

And everybody's a little awkward sometimes and so just sort of go with it. [The] rewards often outweigh the risks and so not every relationship will blossom, but nothing will if you don't plant a seed.

Jared Peterson: Email sucks. In person, or on social media is really the only way to network.



Experts in This Issue

Dr. Amy Smith (she/her)

Amy Smith, PhD, is the Chief Scientist at Blank Slate Technologies in New Haven, CT. Amy is a cognitive scientist who specializes in the influences of technology, aging, and stress on human memory. Prior to joining Blank Slate in 2022, Amy held appointments as a tenure-track professor at Quinnipiac University and a Research Scientist for the Center for Applied Brain and Cognitive Sciences at Tufts University. In addition to studying the human mind, Amy enjoys any combination of: dogs, hikes, singing, dark comedy, learning about sleep and nutrition, and weight training.

Links:

- Her company: <https://www.blankslatetech.co/>
- LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/smitham192/>

Dr. Kripa Sundar (she/her)

Dr. Kripa Sundar is a learning scientist, educator, and parent working to make learning more effective and engaging using data and the learning sciences. Her energies are currently spent leading EdTech Recharge, a global impact consulting and research firm dedicated to sustainable impact in edtech. Her approach to this work focuses on supporting organizations to develop and scale both their impact and their business through the strategic use of learning and education research and field data. She has also published a book (*How do I learn?*) for young ones and their caregivers to spread the joy of learning.

Links:

- Her website: <https://www.kripasundar.com/>
- Her firm: <https://www.edtechrecharge.com/studio>

Mr. Jared Peterson (he/him)

Jared Peterson has a Masters in Behavioral and Decision Sciences from University of Pennsylvania, and consults on issues of behavior change and decision-making. He has worked on projects ranging from researching the triage decisions of combat medics, to behavior change on health apps, to persuading farmers in India to wear PPE when spraying pesticide. You can find him at www.behaviorchange.expert

Dr. Jennifer M. Talarico (she/her)

Dr. Jennifer M. Talarico (she/her) is a professor of cognitive psychology at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, USA. Her area of expertise is in autobiographical memory, in other words, how individuals remember experiences from their own personal past.

Dr. Talarico maintains an active program of research focused on understanding the relationships among event features, individual characteristics, and memory properties. The work she and her colleagues have published has shown that emotional, personally significant events lead to memories that are long-lasting, extremely vivid, and which we believe to be extraordinarily accurate, even though those memories are, in fact, no more accurate than memories for other, more ordinary events. Further, personal significance in that context is often influenced by social group membership

and is more determinative of memory properties than is emotionality per se.

She teaches several courses including introductory lectures and advanced laboratory classes in Cognitive

Psychology as well as courses in research design and statistical analysis. She also regularly teaches a first-year seminar that focuses on the science of learning and how that is applied by individuals and institutions from psychological, sociological, and historical lenses.



[Houghton Library](#), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

From Wikipedia: “William James in Brazil, 1865”

Just a picture of the Father of American Psychology chillin’ in Brazil