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## The Final Word: Reflections from an Unlikely Faculty Member

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## Reflections from an Unlikely Faculty Member

Kathleen Manning, Professor Emerita

Each of us comes to student affairs with a story about what brought us to the field. Mine is a familiar one; I was a student leader who discovered that indeed I could make a living working in higher education. Over my 35 years of working in student affairs, I considered other careers, but there was none other that I believed was as interesting or intellectually stimulating. In student affairs, no two days are ever the same. Few other careers can make that claim.

My switch from administration to faculty in 1989 was as much of a surprise to me as it was to my colleagues. Becoming a faculty member was never a goal of mine. Prior to joining the faculty, I was a successful administrator; a professional who devoted significant time and leadership to professional associations and my home campus. Despite my comfort with and affinity for administration, at the urging of my Indiana University faculty, I reluctantly applied for faculty positions. As I would experience over and over again with graduate students with whom I worked, those faculty saw potential in me that I couldn't yet see in myself. With my retirement in June 2014, I've had time to reflect back on my years as a college administrator and faculty member. In this Final Word, I'll share some of those reflections as I prepare for the next stage of my life.

### Lessons I Learned From HESA Students

#### First One: Social Justice

Teaching in the HESA program, you learn tremendous lessons from students. While I came to the HESA program in 1989 with an avid commitment to diversity (the word we used back then), HESA students helped me evolve that understanding into social justice. Always on the cutting edge of current issues, HESA students shared their thoughts, wrote about innovative issues, and engaged in discussions that mined complexities. I'm grateful to the students who understood social justice when they arrived in Burlington and to students who engaged and struggled to expand their understanding. Students across the spectrum of understanding encourage all of us to grow and expand our perspectives. Hopefully, regardless of where one started, we all grew to embrace a philosophy and approach to education

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*Kathleen Manning was a professor in the Higher Education and Student Affairs program from 1989 until her retirement in 2014. During her 25 years as a professor, Dr. Manning published widely in the student affairs literature and was actively involved in professional associations. She plans to continue to write in retirement in addition to further pursuing her many hobbies.*

that often felt like a giant leap of faith.

### **Lesson Two: People Will Surprise You**

Working in the HESA program taught me that you can never give up on a student. Everyone has a talent, even if personal challenges prevent the student from believing it. It's up to a professor or educator to discover and draw out the student's unique and amazing talent. It's wonderful when the student discovers their gift at the same time that you, the faculty member, do. It then becomes a journey of discovery that you share together. Frequently, I was surprised by a student for whom the light bulb went off, one who made a breakthrough about a difficult issue, or someone who was as surprised and delighted as the rest of us by their brilliant contribution to class discussion.

### **Lesson Three: The Most Maddening Student has a Wonderful Side**

Lesson Three relates to Lesson Two. As educators, we can never give up on students because even the student with whom we struggle the most has an amazing side. Although sometimes buried under layers of personal pain arising from a difficult past, it is wonderful when we, faculty and fellow students, are allowed to see the beauty that someone feels compelled to hide. HESA community members, students, faculty, and colleagues have a talent for helping students bring out and feel free to express their amazing side. While often a painful process of self-awareness, I've been privileged to witness this self-discovery.

### **Lesson Four: The Benefit of Humor**

HESA taught me that most situations will benefit from a bit of humor. HESA students often take themselves too seriously; perhaps a byproduct of the high stakes game we ask you to play. I've appreciated the students who had the skill to inject just the right amount of humor to diffuse a tense situation. These students knew that humor and understanding was important to the HESA and student affairs community as a whole.

## **Lessons I Hope You've Learned From Me**

### **Lesson One: Who We Really Are**

I hope I've conveyed to you that student affairs professionals are educators who make life and death decisions on a daily basis. Student affairs educators do amazing work; we literally save lives. As Annie Stevens, Vice Provost for Student Affairs, articulates, HESA students are retention ambassadors, particularly for students from underrepresented groups. We encourage, cajole, and empower students to

remain in school. This action enables students who may be the first-in-family to achieve a lifelong goal – a goal that helps them obtain a level of success previously unavailable to them.

### **Lesson Two: Making the World a More Just Place**

My wish is that I have conveyed hope more than despair. Student affairs professionals have the opportunity to make the world a more just place through our social justice efforts. We seek to make college campuses and by extension the outside communities more just by creating fair and equitable processes. While the lack of fairness may often feel overwhelming, I hope I've helped HESA students celebrate the successes that come from those efforts.

### **Lesson Three: The Obligation to Make the Field Better**

Student affairs remains a young field. Our literature is in an adolescent stage with lots of room for growth and expansion. The gift of education that has been given to all of us comes with the obligation to make the field better. Whether through writing, presenting, or leading, opportunities abound for advancing the field on behalf of students.

### **Lesson Four: Balance**

My early retirement, a surprise to some but a long-standing goal of mine, has, hopefully, taught you the value of creating balance in your life. Our lives should be filled with both the vocational and avocational. I've been blessed to have an active personal life through sailing, skiing, traveling, and other personal pursuits. This has allowed me to be involved in communities outside the University – an important way to maintain my sanity. These activities have been as important, if not more important, to me than my professional pursuits. A full and happy life depends on a good balance of the personal and professional. The student affairs field tends to over-emphasize the professional, often at the expense of the personal. You cannot be a successful professional without balance.

### **Finally, What I Didn't Teach or Wish I Had Taught You**

I chose not to tell you that student affairs work is amazingly hard – too hard at times. I tried not to let on that the negative side of the complexity we work with doesn't always balance the positive side of that complexity. I was afraid that such honesty might scare you off from entering and staying in the field. I also wanted you to realize that amazing benefits come from the challenges that student affairs educators face on a daily basis.

I also neglected to tell you that the ambiguity of student affairs can harm you if you aren't careful. I wanted you to learn how to manage the ambiguity and uncertainty without too heavy a hand from me. That professional life lesson is one that cannot be taught but must be discovered. That's where theory-to-practice comes in. I worried that you often felt like there wasn't a method to the madness. That what I was trying to teach you was getting lost in the process.

I enter retirement with some thoughts about what I wish I had taught you. These are the secrets of student affairs that you, hopefully, learn in your first few years of practice; those first few years after HESA when you have a chance to reflect on what you've learned.

- Resilience. You must have resilience if you are to survive HESA, student affairs, and life. Many of you have survived the worst already. I wish you the lessons of resilience to realize that there still is beauty in the world – even if it doesn't always seem that way.
- Persistence. I continually asked you to hang in there. I hope you learn the lessons of pacing and timing that enable long-term, helpful choices. These lessons about persistence will serve you well. I hope you use them to remain in the field for a lifelong career.
- Strategy. I wish I had emphasized strategy more. I would have like to teach how one makes choices not to do things that don't have enough pay off; how not to waste your time on something with insufficient reward. I never figured out how to teach the art of strategic decision making; how to make decisions that allow you to get the most from what you deliberately chose to do while maintaining balance and health.

In closing, I want to thank the generations of HESA students who have allowed me to engage in teaching and learning. I thank you for trusting that the process I asked you to follow would have positive outcomes, that we would learn from the readings I assigned, that there really was value in the assignments we undertook, and that we would together create a community of learners who would benefit from our time together. I want to thank you for all you taught me.