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Ready for Anything

Edward Keagle

Graduates of student affairs programs do not all sustain careers in college student personnel. Is that a failure of the programs? What is it about the student personnel point of view that allows many of us to find success in alternative careers? We owe a lot to the lessons learned in higher education administration. The author began his professional career in student affairs before realizing a long-deferred childhood interest to become an architect. Thirty years later, he continues to draw on training from his first career. Perhaps a M.Ed. degree in college student affairs, along with working experience in the field, can prepare people with the organizational, individual and group skills needed to thrive in many arenas outside of the academy. Scan the alumni roster from the Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) and Student Personnel Services (SPS) programs from the past 40 years, and you will be struck by the number of graduates now in alternate careers – attorneys, personnel managers, along with the majority of expected job titles. Clearly the profession offers a solid foundation for a variety of pursuits. It also broadens the reach of the profession to have expatriates in other fields.

I came to the University of Vermont (UVM) directly from college in 1973. A recession narrowed job opportunities in my professional field of television, and that, along with some personal ambivalence about commercial broadcasting, propelled me in a new vocational direction. Trusted mentors suggested that a more interesting future lay in student personnel considering my extensive involvement in student life as an undergraduate. After UVM graduate school and several years in the field, I reached a point where I again questioned my career track. My positions called for increasing administrative duties and less student contact,

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and my background in the visual arts was underutilized. In the midst of another recession and while caring for my first child, I began re-reading Maslow (1954) and Erikson (1968) and realized I had abandoned my childhood obsession for architecture. Encouraged by examples in Cross (1981), I enrolled in a four-year graduate program in architecture.

On a typical day I will be meeting with clients, coordinating project teams, interviewing prospective staff, mentoring interns, or preparing submissions for new projects. Other times I will be negotiating contracts, traveling to job sites, answering questions from bidders, or scheduling staff for the coming week. On a good day there will be something to design.

There is excitement in the design phase, a nonlinear but deeply satisfying exercise best shared with trusted colleagues, enlightened clients, and enthusiastic interns. The fact is that the time we spend in creative mode is very small. Edison had it right. Genius, or design in our case, is one percent inspiration and ninety nine percent perspiration. That ninety nine percent of hard work and focus on detail, along with technical training and lifelong learning, are what we do to earn our keep. Fortunately for me, I had a good foundation as a student affairs professional and enjoyed nearly a decade in academia. What better training for my new career or for those in many other work settings outside of higher education?

I have often thought about the parallels between my careers in the last 30 years since I left the HESA world for that of design and construction. Almost weekly, I am aware of things I do or ways I react to events that I realize were learned in student affairs. I also recognize the familiar in some of the things we do as architects.

Here are some of my observations.

Administration

After a decade or two as an architect I discovered the irony of my career change. I left HESA because I was becoming more of an administrator and less creative. Years later, I realized I was still a manager, albeit in a creative field. How lucky for me that I had some management training and the firsthand experience to give me confidence. Architecture schools typically offer only a few classes in practice and project management; I had a good grounding in the theory and the practice of management. This preparation accelerated my late-bloomer career and gave me an edge. HESA graduate students and young professionals are routinely leading or managing dozens of employees, or responsible for hundreds of students. Organizing and advising these student and professional activities requires a high degree of coordination within the unforgiving framework of the academic calendar.

They do this all the time while managing administration egos, negotiating campus politics, and nurturing young students.

Time Management

In the design professions time is our currency. Our chief measure of productivity is the hourly rate. Architecture is a labor-intensive enterprise even with computers. Being efficient is vital since projects change course for many reasons. It is easy for a project or a firm to go into a deep hole financially or out of business altogether. Helping others to be efficient and cost-effective is valued. The time management seminars I attended as a HESA professional enabled me to offer them at my office on several occasions and raised my consciousness about the simple strategies one can use to become more efficient personally and in organizing others.

Professional Development

Nurturing, mentoring, and developing staff is second nature in education. Retention is important to any office. Most student affairs professionals are naturally inclined to recruit and hire the best people and see that they get the support they need to further their careers. Not all design offices share this view. After interning at several firms and finally coming to work at my current office, I soon felt right at home. The partners valued the staff. Unlike some firms that hire and fire as projects come and go or host grueling unpaid internships, I found a work culture that rewarded high expectations with high regard. In addition to the usual fringe benefits, we were encouraged to become Registered Architects. Licensure is incentivized, promotion stalls until you pass the Architectural Registration Exam (ARE) and interns are given support via advising and reimbursement to do so. We offer numerous Continuing Education Unit (CEU) seminars required for those already licensed; we have memorable parties, happy hours, cookouts, and many other unique perks.

Staff should feel appreciated and empowered. They need to see themselves as rising talents and prospective deans or partners even though they have many years ahead of them before they reach a level of unquestioned attainment and authority. Jackie Gribbon's resumé and job search group in my final year at UVM was a model for how to motivate young professionals to reach their potential. We were critiqued and pushed, and yet we were encouraged to believe our futures were unlimited. I learned from reading Rogers (1961) that unconditional positive regard is strong medicine for the psyche.

Diversity and Helping All Voices to be Heard

Collaboration is at the heart of our design process, and everyone from intern to partner needs to feel empowered to have a say. Good staff development policies set the stage for full collaboration. We joke that you are likely to have your ideas turned down or disregarded as often as not, but our senior staff look for interns who keep coming back and keep offering ideas or alternatives despite a cool reception on one occasion. In recruiting, we look for people who have the self-possession to thrive in this arena. To help make sure many different views are represented, our professional staff come from a variety of backgrounds, regions, and countries. We try to create a cosmopolitan atmosphere in our New England location. The same principles that tell us a diverse student body is important in education tell us it improves our design abilities.

Optimism

In the face of setbacks, boundless enthusiasm leavened with humor helps us carry on. Realizing that failure is an opportunity to make something better is a lesson learned by those who have struggled. Architecture school revolves around the studio model and critics can be harsh. We learn to be resilient. Many times our initial design is poorly received. We need to go back and create other options or start over. You learn to be dispassionate and not view your “creation” as something precious, just one possible response to the problem, site, or program. Expectations are high and deadlines are relentless. Good designers learn when it is okay to break the rules to get something memorable. As a HESA grad, I was prepared for this environment with an upbeat attitude. Now when I see a resume from a candidate who was an RA or campus leader, I get a level of confidence in their ability to fit into our environment. Then I can focus on their design portfolio. The potential for rejection does not end in school. An architectural office may only get selected for one out of every ten prospective projects it pursues.

Developing Consensus

Shepherding projects and keeping them alive is an art. Momentum needs to be maintained. We have some clients, projects, non-profits and community groups that have worked with us for five or ten years before a building or renovation is achieved. Even for large institutions and corporate clients with the means, a prospective project is a tender shoot. It is rare that a fully formed, programmed project falls into our laps. Many do not end up where they started. Indeed the most sustainable building is one that is not built. Often we can find solutions that simply involve an efficient renovation or a willingness to think differently about scheduling. The patience and persistence to develop a project over time and build consensus for it is familiar to HESA professionals.

Building Community

To me this used to mean strengthening bonds and ties among a group of people. Now it means that, and something more concrete. It means creating space to support and empower people and groups, whether in residence halls, museums, sports facilities, research science labs, religious, or academic buildings. Workshops and participatory design charrettes are unique to our practice, and their use helped me to feel at home when I arrived 21 years ago. These approaches come naturally to those schooled in group theory and residential education.

Shared Experiences

The value of shared experiences in building community was something I learned early on in graduate school. During my final semester at UVM, with ample help from my new bride, we created a patchwork quilt with all the residents of Wright hall taking part and embroidering their own distinctive patch. We raffled it off, and hopefully Madeleine V. still considers it a treasured keepsake of her UVM years. In addition to our professional duties here, sometimes the little things like our badminton tournament, bowling nights, ad hoc design presentations, or field trips to construction sites give us these shared experiences and help us connect with the people we work with during the waking hours and beyond. It is much like residence hall programming and creates relationships between staff that we draw on in the heat of developing projects.

Dealing with Ambiguity

Building codes, not to mention zoning regulations, are fraught with contradictions and conflicted meaning. They are layered human constructs, much like software, with many work-arounds to allow them to stay in force until the time comes for a paradigm shift. That happens rarely, so it helps to see through the chaff to the kernel of real intention. Student affairs professionals help others to deal with the ambiguities of adult life and understand that everything is not always as it seems. Chickering and Riesser (1993) introduced the Seven Vectors of Identity Development which still help me think about how to respond to the frustration of working constructively with codes, regulations, and standards. Certainly, the first vector, *developing competence*, and the second, *managing emotions* are at play. When faced with an interpretation that could be cheaper or advantageous to my client is not the seventh vector, *developing integrity*, important in my professional judgment? The tenets of personal growth and development I learned in graduate school apply to architects as well as college students.

Counseling and Listening

Most people do not realize how client-centered architecture is. The novelistic image of the heroic designer in search of truth is not accurate. The most memorable buildings derive from engaged clients with clearly understood goals made real by attentive designers. The importance of relationships fostered and tested over time is valued by student affairs staff. Successful design firms recognize this, too. “You are only as good as your last job” is a common refrain. In our office much of our work comes from repeat clients, institutional and residential. Some of these relationships stretch back 30 years or more. We seek out and hire staff that can maintain these ties with existing clients and help us create new ones. It is not enough to be inventive designers or technically proficient; we seek personable, sociable designers who enjoy engagement with others and listen carefully so we can realize client’s goals. In fact listening skills should be taught in every professional program.

Collaboration

Not only do we work together closely in-house, these days architects must be able to engage, manage, and coordinate the activities of a vast team of consultants. These include structural and mechanical engineers, civil engineers, code consultants, specifications writers, acousticians, IT and AV professionals, landscape architects, cost consultants, and arcane specialty consultants. We need to bring them into the process at the right time so the work flow is maintained. It can be like conducting a symphony for three or four years, over the phone or online when we are not meeting in person. It is also very much like establishing and maintaining a noteworthy student affairs program.

Negotiation

Architecture is about building as opposed to winning arguments and points. Architects and contractors, although engaged in different activities, live to build. A project that goes on hold is unsatisfying and doesn’t allow us to show what we can do. Alas, there are no unlimited budgets; every building is the result of successful compromises achieved throughout the design and construction process. Some aspects are not negotiable such as structural design, life safety, and so on, but often some cost reductions end up producing a better, simpler design. Again, a student affairs background can give one the foundation necessary to negotiate and find the acceptable middle ground.

Vision

We try to help our clients make decisions and develop master plans or projects for the long view not for short term results. In the same way, student affairs administrators have learned to approach their institutional needs with a view to the future and counsel students to make good and responsible choices in the conduct of their academic careers. Sustainability is the current term for an attitude many of us have had for years. This awareness for energy conservation and the environment has helped us to shift the focus from first cost to operational costs, and given us a reason to do the right thing in the face of budget pressures. My personal concern for conservation was sharpened in my first year at UVM when the Arab Oil Embargo occurred in October 1973. One important lesson from then was the difficult choices the administration made to cope with the staggering rise in fuel costs. Rather than simply reducing department budgets across the board, they made hard decisions to maintain strong programs and eliminate others. This was unpopular perhaps, but mindful of what must be preserved at the core, not just in an emergency but also in daily situations. Living through that era was important to my personal development and helped me become the person I am now.

Major Influences

Many experiences prepared me for the work I do as an architect. As a college athlete on crew, I learned about teamwork and leveraging the power of the group. My architectural training was lengthy, rigorous, intense, and continues to this day. I studied and traveled. I learned to see that an architecture education can be another foundation for one's world view.

I also learned much from my student affairs experience. The goal then was to get things done for the benefit of people. In architecture now the goal is similar, to get memorable spaces built for the benefit of people. My background has served me well and I consider the time I spent before becoming an architect an asset. Those of you now in the field should get on with your careers confident that you will be prepared for a variety of opportunities that come your way, some that you may not even imagine now. You are ready for anything.

Here is one example of why it is good to have HESA grads in wider circulation. Several times a year I catch myself reminding colleagues to refer to dorms as residence halls, explaining pedantically that the Latin root of dormitory is dorm, as in dormant, or sleepy. A good residential life program is not about sleep, it is about living and growing. Dr. Keith Miser, then Director of Residential Life and one of my professors, taught me that. Now I teach it to others. Those of us who move into other professions are not abandoning the profession. We are extending its influence. We not only benefit personally from the can-do attitudes

and preparation for leadership we gained from HESA, but we are also valuable emissaries, helping those around us to understand the importance of student affairs to a vibrant university experience and the value of its practitioners to the students they serve.

“Education is a social process; education is growth; education is not preparation for life but is life itself.”

- John Dewey

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