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Tidbits and Tangents: A Guide to Become the Shoulders Upon Which You Stand

Nathan Victoria

Finding the right opening hook for a paper, especially reflective essays with their often vague prompts, was one of the hardest parts of my time at the University of Vermont (UVM). One may assume that unpacking my multiple identities of power and privilege, adjusting to sub-zero wind chills and “lake effect” snow, or functioning from the perspective of being one of two, rather than one of many, were harder to overcome. OK. Upon further reflection, they were. But I still never enjoyed searching for just the right literary launching pad to begin. Then why you might ask did I willingly accept the invitation to write this reflection? Three words—The Vermont Connection (TVC).

You see, TVC is one of my many networks to which I commit first, ask questions later. Through my travels on behalf of NASPA, I have seen how far our diverse network of professionals reaches; a network that would not be what it is today without the commitment of our matriculated generations of cohorts. The spirit of giving instilled in me at UVM is why I feel so privileged working for NASPA, a professional association working for the advancement, health, and sustainability of the student affairs profession. I get to give to a profession that has already given so much to me. Each day, I influence and shape the professional development of our field to break cycles and build bridges to transform higher education.

It is from this bird’s-eye perspective that I share some insights. For those of you who have communicated with me at NASPA, you know I tend to ramble with disjointed thoughts, seeing connections among disparate objects. But I’ve tried to distill my thoughts into succinct statements at the end of each section. Hopefully that will help translate my “Nathan speak.”

Nathan Victoria is the Director of Member Engagement and Student Initiatives for NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, the leading voice for student affairs administration, policy, and practice. Although the prospects of being a dancing psychologist were tempting (Nathan received his bachelor of arts in dance and psychology at Wesleyan University in Middletown, CT), he enrolled immediately into the University of Vermont’s Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) program, where he is a 2007 graduate. He finds it fitting that his journey has brought him to work for NASPA, as a Region I undergraduate pre-conference showed him the possibilities of a career in student affairs and higher education.

To successfully break the cycles and transform higher education, you must use the privileges you have been given.

Always make room on the bench.

Going directly from college to graduate school and then to NASPA as my first professional home was nerve-wracking. I continually questioned my qualifications to plan professional development for the field. Having never worked professionally on a campus, what sort of guidance and leadership could I provide the NASPA Undergraduate Fellows Program (NUFP) Fellows, undergraduate students participating in a NASPA initiative I was tasked to run? It would take my attendance at my first Summer Leadership Institute (SLI) (Arkansas, 2008), now named the Dungy Leadership Institute after NASPA's Exec Director Emeritus Gwen Dungy, to realize how I could contribute in this position. *(For those of you who do not know, the mission of NUFP is to increase the number of persons of ethnic-minority, persons with disabilities, and/or persons who identify as LGBTQ in student affairs and higher education.)*

Being a sound travel agent and binder producer (OK, clearly I did more than that), I proved my competence to the SLI faculty. But what about the students? Well, when one of the Fellows came up to me and asked "can we talk later because I have a few questions before SLI ends," I received my opportunity to overcome my fear of being "just" a new professional. Little did I know this seemingly innocuous request would become one of those moments I would treasure throughout my career.

Jamie [a pseudonym] was a Fellow I met earlier in the year at the 2008 NASPA Annual Conference in Boston. Knowing very few Asian Americans in the field, let alone males, I saw it as my mission to make Jamie feel comfortable. I had an inkling about what he wanted to talk about, but when Jamie began by posing a series of general questions, including how I got to work in the NASPA office, I thought perhaps my 'dar was rusty.

As dinner ended and dancing commenced, I could tell that Jamie had more questions so we went outside to sit on a bench, giving him the privacy needed to ask whatever questions he had left. I don't remember how long we talked, but Jamie says it was "long enough for all the Fellows to stare at me like I was going through a mid-life crisis." In truth, I do not really remember all the specifics of what we talked about. I just remember being in the moment, talking from my heart, and hoping that I was what Jamie needed at that moment: a confidant. It did not matter that I did not see myself as a role model, or I had feelings of inadequacy, or I was a new professional. By reaching out, he enabled me to assume a role I was not certain I was ready for, yet one that has since been the crux of my professional fulfillment and personal pride: a mentor. The conversation did eventually take

the turn I had anticipated, and I was able to not only support but also challenge Jamie to give voice to that part of himself previously silenced. I will always carry with me the honor of being a part of his coming out process.

I was sad to leave Arkansas and SLI 2008. Never before had I participated in a leadership retreat where every member bonded so quickly and deeply. I had left Washington D.C. questioning my qualifications to help facilitate this institute, but I returned reassured of my skills, accepting of my new hat as an accessible and open-hearted role model for the Fellows, and feeling connected to a few new mentors of my own.

A few days after I got back to D.C., I received this note from Jamie:

I owe you a special thanks for taking some time to talk about ‘life.’ Being an Asian male who is in the field, proudly out, and most importantly, happy, is who I aspire to be. Looking up to you and talking with you this past week made me realize that it’s not impossible.

If I can impact students’ lives the same way that you have mine and the other 25 fellows who attended the institute, I’ll be a satisfied man. I know that this is the one field where I can do that!

You may be sorry that you told me to be in touch about everything going on in my life! I look forward to continuing our conversations in the future and seeing you around! (Personal communication, July 13, 2009)

I know I am not sorry, Jamie. Notes like this are why I am inspired to be in student affairs. And the icing on the cake? Jamie has had his own bench conversations with students on his campus.

To successfully break the cycles and transform higher education, you must speak your truth and encourage those around you to speak theirs.

Grow where you are planted.

Aside from being a part of a formative experience for future student affairs professionals, SLI has also offered me opportunities to find my own mentors. The year after my experience with Jamie, I had the opportunity to have my own bench session with then NASPA Board Chair, Mike Segawa, Dean of Students at University of Puget Sound.

Struggling with whether to return to a campus or continue with my path at NASPA,

I asked Mike what he thought my next professional step should be. He looked out onto the Puget Sound (*instead of the streets of Fayetteville, AR, this celebration dinner was on a boat*) and said “Grow where you are planted” (M. Segawa, Personal communication, July 9, 2009). Mike proceeded to tell me that the student affairs journey is one with many twists and turns. Life will often take us places where we thought we would not be. While we can complain and try to get out of these situations, we can instead choose to establish ourselves where we are and make the best of the situation. This sage piece of advice was passed onto Mike by one of *his* mentors, and it was exactly what I needed to hear from him at that time. Without this perspective I’m not sure I would be professionally where I am today.

To successfully break the cycles and transform higher education, you must make the most of your situation and live in the moment.

Squeak strategically, but know why you are squeaking.

I was recently interviewed and featured in a cover article for *Associations Now*, the monthly publication of *ASAE - The Center for Association Leadership*, my professional association, (*yes, there is an association for association professionals, meta, I know*). Profiling three “Executives of the future,” I was coined the “change agent” who “has a method for getting ahead in association management. Call it strategic squeaking.” (Full text available at <http://associationsnow.com/2012/09/exec-of-the-future-the-change-agent/>). In the article, I stated “I’m sure you have heard of the aphorism ‘the squeaky wheel gets the oil’. The squeaky wheel is also annoying and sometimes, after enough oil, it just gets flat-out replaced.” To be a competent administrator and make the change you wish to see, you have to remain in the game to make an impact.

Often as new professionals, we have a list of black and white standards driving our professional philosophy. But as we mature professionally, we realize confronting *every* issue *all* the time is debilitating. Through trial and error, we learn our non-negotiables, raising our important issues to appropriate parties in a timely fashion, rather than addressing every injustice all the time. We need to ensure our voice is not ignored nor forgotten by identifying our allies and utilizing our networks to effectively make change on both an institutional and individual level. We squeak strategically, finding others to share our concerns in concert together.

To successfully break the cycles and transform higher education, you must be an effective voice for change.

At Wesleyan, we...

Victor Butterfield was the 11th president of my alma mater, and although I do

not remember the exact quote or when it was stated, he shared a concept similar to the following—If Wesleyan was the best time of your life, we've failed you. This sentiment resonates strongly for our field. As student affairs professionals, we not only facilitate welcoming and empowering environments for our students while they are on campus, but also create opportunities for a better future. We encourage these individuals to move past the theoretical lives of college education to apply and practice what they learn in the world.

There is hope in our future, and I am reminded of that possibility with every interaction with TVC. One of my favorite times at the NASPA Annual Conference is attending the TVC Reception. To see past alumni, current students, and potential applicants all interacting in one space inspires me. But these fleeting interactions show how TVC respects the past and works to reinvent the future *in the moment*.

When we are not at conferences, when we do not have these structured get-togethers, how are we building on the foundation that UVM has given us? And how are we ensuring that this foundation stays just as strong in the future? We stand on the shoulders of those that have come before us. We need to ensure that our shoulders are well built to be stood upon.

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