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Out West

Matthew R. Caires

I am a Westerner. I was born and raised in western states, earned an undergraduate degree from a public land-grant research university in the West, and for the last eight years I have lived and worked in the state of Wyoming. In the West, our landscapes and our culture have been shaped by vast open space, wind and water, violent upheavals, and a glacial pace. Those of us from the West work hard, espouse traditional western values, and pull ourselves up by our proverbial bootstraps. We like to use words like “libertarian” and “conservationist” to describe who we are and what we stand for. We are independent thinkers and writers—we have to be. Throughout the Rocky Mountain region, values and lifestyles are rooted in surviving long winters, long distances, and awe-inspiring open space.

Yet, when one digs a bit deeper into the history and culture of the North American West, one can find a richer, more complicated truth. While Westerners might espouse fiery independent rhetoric, those of us from the West have always relied on others to make our lifestyle a reality. For over 200 years, the people who live beyond the Mississippi River have received assistance and subsidies from those who reside out east. There is a long and mired history of the U.S. federal government, funded in large part on the backs of East Coast citizens and businesses, providing financial support for the West. From federal land subsidies for the railroads during the Gold Rush and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) water and dam projects in the early twentieth century, to livestock grazing on public lands and tax-breaks for the energy industry that followed, there is no question that the East has supported western development and lifestyle since the inception of western exploration.

We don't like to admit it. Frankly, we don't even like to talk about it. But, there is very little debate today that those of us out west depend upon those of you who live out east. This juxtaposition, seeing ourselves as self-reliant with a sovereign independent spirit on the one hand, with the reality of depending on the federal government for our livelihood and lifestyle on the other, continues to haunt Westerners and western culture today. Western (2002) has gone so far as to call this western independent spirit a myth. This myth includes our legends of austere cowboys on horseback, the romantic Great Plains homesteader in a

Matthew R. Caires currently serves as Assistant Dean of Students at the University of Wyoming. He has a passion for student development, with avocations in backcountry skiing and riding his mountain bike. While a HESA student, he hiked the entire Long Trail and only got lost twice.

quaint sod house on the prairie, and our deadly outlaws in comical western hats. The struggle for true western independence is as elusive and nonexistent today as those iconic images from over a century ago.

I grew up and was socialized in the West with these images as the backdrop. At 22 years old, I had the ardent and impetuous spirit commonly found in Westerners who eschew any type of help from others. Upon finishing an undergraduate degree in history and political science and after a good deal of success in student government, I made the decision to pursue a Master's degree in higher education and student affairs. After applying to programs all over the country, making the decision to pursue this degree in the HESA program at the University of Vermont was not made lightly. UVM? In New England? Next to the Green Mountains??? OUT EAST?!? Not to be diminished by any type of challenge, I made the decision to move to the Eastern Time zone and to test my mettle against the East Coast coterie.

How would my western upbringing and education fit into this new and unfamiliar eastern culture? How would my academic credentials from a western state school stack up against the students who attended elite private institutions out east? Would the students from schools like Tufts, Harvard, and Dartmouth accept me as a peer? Or, would my public education relegate me to a second-class student in the classroom? How would I establish myself as an academic equal to those from the East while also convincing them that they were missing the enlightenment I had received from a childhood out west?

After moving to Vermont and starting the HESA program, it took me a while to understand that I really had nothing to prove to either the students in the program or the faculty and staff at the institution. Most of them were not from the West, and yet, they all seemed well-adjusted, successful, and satisfied with their East Coast upbringings. While initially I thought these "Easterners" would be filled with judgment and contempt for anyone or anything beyond the confines of New England or New York, I found the HESA community to be one of inclusion and acceptance. Further than the expected acceptance of difference such as gender, race, and sexual orientation, the HESA community invited me, a loud, young, arrogant, White American male (from the WEST!) to join their academic community. It was the members of this community who shaped me, both professionally as well as personally, that I remember vividly today.

Names like Nash and Nestor. Manning, Hunter, and Gribbons. Hewitt-Main and Schulman. Pat Brown. Students like Speidel, Monahan, Mossler, and Kennedy. All of these faculty, staff, and students, in their own unique and special way, contributed to create a culture that was distinctively known to the HESA community at UVM. And, while many of these names have changed during the last 10 years,

I suspect others have brought their special gifts and insights to make the HESA community what it is today. It is a community that is open-minded, accepting of difference, and a proponent of social justice. Nonetheless, I do not mean to say that this culture and community is always accepting in a “Pollyanna” or morally relativistic way. Nor do I mean to say that my time during the HESA program was always successful or that it continually felt good. There was very little that felt “good” about earning a Master’s degree in the HESA program. It was hard work. I use words like demanding, never-ending, arduous, and *laborious* to describe my HESA experience. (Don’t tell David Nestor, but I remember more than once sleeping on the third floor of the Nicholson House after rewriting yet another paper for one of my HESA classes).

Yet, for those who persist, who complete all the required reading and submit all the required writing, who make it through “comps,” who find a way to survive a part-time assistantship that is more like a full-time job and three practica (each of which are like full-time jobs—thanks Jackie), and an academic load on par with those in the sciences or engineering, the HESA program adequately prepares any graduate student for a career as a student affairs practitioner like no other program in the country. Students in HESA learn how to multitask, successfully complete their work regardless of the lateness of the hour, support others in crisis, and consult and ask for help in times of need. Learning the ability to provide stability during times of overload or emergencies, rise above the noise of our incredibly busy lives, and offer sound counsel and perspective for the students and faculty on our campuses is the true heart and soul of our work in student affairs. HESA students learn these, and many other important lessons, from their immersion in the UVM program. Theory to practice is more than just an idea espoused by those in HESA; it is the foundation for all the demanding experiences that are required in those 2 short years. That foundation allows students to gain a valuable skill set that helps ensure their future success as student affairs administrators.

For me, preparing for a career in student affairs by only reading books is analogous to learning how to ride a bike by reading a how-to guide: it is helpful, but there is no better way to learn than getting out there and crashing a few times. I cannot think of any other program that allows students to try on a variety of new ideas and experiences while consistently welcoming them back into their community, regardless of the magnitude of their blunders. The supportive faculty, staff, and students in the program allowed me to crash on more than one occasion. They also helped pick me up, dust me off, and put me back into the game, time and time again.

Ten years after my HESA experience, there is no question that the lessons and skills I gained at UVM continue to guide my personal and professional practice

today. I still consider my memories in Burlington to be among the most satisfying and fun that I have had in nearly four decades. Since then, I have found a great personal and professional fit living in Laramie, Wyoming, working for the state land-grant institution in that town. It is a western school in a western state that espouses traditional western values. And yet, I have come to realize that the values in student affairs endure, regardless of location.

I could probably find a similar job at a higher education institution in almost any region of the country. Working in student affairs is, in part, a lifestyle choice. These jobs are overwhelming at various times during the academic year. And while these positions are serious, it is just as important to not take ourselves so seriously. We all need to find other passions outside of our work; otherwise we do a disservice to our students and other professionals on campus. When I face the overwhelming moments of a mid-level student affairs professional, I rely on the myriad lessons and work-ethic that I learned during HESA. And, when the down times come to campus, I find time to hike, climb, bike, and ski as much as possible. The activities offered from a lifestyle in the western mountains helps to ground me in a way that brings stability and clarity to my role on campus.

I am at home out west—it is where I am from and where my family lives. Still, I cannot help but recognize the members of the HESA community whom I have leaned on throughout the past decade. Without the support that I received from UVM and all of those individuals out east, I would not be able to contribute at the level I do at my institution today. I wish all of the HESA alumni/ae and those currently in the program my best, regardless of where you call home.

References

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