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Jacque Little

Judy Raper

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Bridging the Gap: Perspectives from Different Generations on the Field of Student Affairs

Jacque Little & Judy Raper

Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher, once posed three questions for individuals to consider when contemplating their spiritual lives: What can I know? What can I do? And, What can I hope? (n.d.) These three questions, while fundamentally simple, are provocative and powerful and lead to significant soul searching regarding one's values, beliefs, actions, and perspective. It strikes us that these three questions can also provide student affairs professionals with the opportunity for rich dialogue and critical reflection regarding our roles in and beliefs about a profession fraught with change, challenges, mystery, and ethical dilemmas. In this article, two authors, nearly two decades apart with regard to age and professional experience, will explore these questions in the form of a dialogue.

Introduction

In the student affairs profession, much emphasis is placed on the importance of relationships between senior members and emerging professionals because these relationships provide tremendous benefits for all involved. Senior members in the field are often motivated and inspired by the energy and hope young professionals possess. Conversely, new professionals are offered the insight of experience, encouragement, and support from those who have spent years working in a fulfilling and often daunting profession.

Jacque Little, just creating her professional voyage a year after graduating from the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) program, and Judy Raper, the Director of Residential Life for a highly respected program, have been privileged to enjoy such a relationship. Having both graduated from the HESA program at the University of Vermont (UVM), we have discovered and experienced shared values, rich conversations, and divergent perspectives in the course of our relationship. While we share many of the same core values, our experiences and relationships with students are vastly different based on the nearly two decade gap in between the students with whom we have worked most closely.

To bring to light the importance of relationships between seasoned and new professionals and to engage in meaningful dialogue, Jacque and Judy decided to write this article in the form of a conversation. We will be addressing three critical questions posed by philosopher Immanuel Kant. These questions were originally posed in relationship to one's spiritual beliefs, but for purposes of this article they will be applied to the student affairs profession. These questions are: 1) What can I know?, 2) What can I believe?, and 3) What can I hope? (n.d.). This article will take the form of a conversation, with each author independently writing her own reflection and then sharing it with other.

What Can I Know?

Judy

It is quite humbling to ponder this question after nearly twenty years in this profession. The one thing I know for sure is that I thought I had more answers than questions when I embarked on a career in student affairs, and today it is the opposite. I have far more questions than I do answers. Surprisingly, most days this is okay with me. To be uncertain brings to my life a sense of mystery. To have answers gives me nothing to do but share my truth with others. So I've learned, for the most part, to live with the many questions that give me a reason to get out of bed in the morning. Still, I believe we need some certainty to hang onto in our lives. There must be some things we know for sure to persevere.

When I graduated from the University of Vermont in 1986, I believed I had a rather superior knowledge of student development theory. The truth is, I did not spend enough time studying during graduate school.

Jacque Little earned her B.A. in Speech Communications from Westminster College in New Wilmington, P.A. She graduated from the HESA program at UVM in the spring of 2004 and has been working at Keene State College as a Residence Director since fall 2004.

Judy Raper is the Director of Residential Life at Keene State College. She received a Bachelor of Science degree from Indiana University where she majored in Elementary Education. She received her Masters and Doctoral degrees from the University of Vermont in Higher Education.

Nevertheless, I had some instincts about this work, wonderful colleagues, and professors who challenged my thinking and expanded my notion of how students develop and how I can impact their growth. Today, I can still rattle off Chickering's vectors almost effortlessly, and I do my best to stay current in my research about the "millennial student." I am still surrounded by colleagues who challenge me, and I supervise entry-level professionals who invigorate me with new ideas, energy, and passion.

Sometimes, however, I wonder if the conversations we are having in our staff meetings concerning students and their development are too far removed from the reality of our students' lives to have a meaningful impact. I know that no two students develop in the same way. I know that theories are intended to inform our thinking, planning, and practice, but are not designed to be broadly prescriptive. As the doors to higher education continue to open wider (for which I am grateful) and our student population grows even more diverse, theory needs to be practiced even more carefully. I also know that as I progress through my career, I know students less and less. The decisions I make have a lasting and significant impact on students' lives, but I have far less contact with them than those who are removed from the decision-making processes. I struggle with this all of the time.

I do know that despite changes in culture, methods of communication, relationships, and classroom teaching, students' needs are not all that different today than they were twenty or even one hundred years ago. They need to belong. They need to learn to think critically. They need to understand the privilege that higher education affords them and the consequent responsibility it places upon them. They need to be able to articulate their ideas orally and in writing. They need to know how to compromise and forgive. They need to respect others and themselves. They need to be willing to take risks. They need to celebrate success and learn from mistakes. They need to know how to work and live with others. In addition, I believe wholeheartedly that students need to have faith in someone or something. They need a sense of purpose. I also know that the decisions we make about residence hall design, policy, admissions criteria, credit models, programming, meal plans, safety and security, and strategic planning contribute to determining whether or not students' needs are met. I know this in both my heart and my head, and yet some days my work can seem so disconnected from the reality of student life. I wonder sometimes how my decisions both big and small will impact students' lives.

Jacque

When I think of this question, my mind immediately goes to the things I do not know, for there is so much more to choose from in that category. As I read Judy's reflection, however, I agree with and relate to much of what she knows about students' needs. A sense of belonging, a sense of responsibility for self and actions, forgiveness, and openness to those who have lived different experiences are all imperative for growth out of childhood and closer to adulthood. I can say that I know this because of my own experience in college and graduate school. For me, textbook information came and went each week with each class, but what captured my imagination and moved me was allowing others to know me; my struggles, my fears, and my hopes. Those professors and a few intimate friends who provided a space for me to explore these things about myself allowed me to embrace questions and be comfortable with not having answers. They validated my thoughts and decisions each step of the way, and they were most crucial in my journey of learning and life. My experience with these professors and friends ignited my commitment to create similar experiences for the students I serve.

I know that I can only know my own experiences. Throughout my first year as a new professional, I learned that at times others' experiences are more important than my own when departmental decisions are being made. I have learned that sometimes the energy I hope to use toward building relationships with students will be consumed by the completion of administrative tasks. I have learned that by having to spend many hours behind a desk, at a program, or in a meeting I sometimes unfortunately settle for minimal interactions with students. Yet, as you say, Judy, in order to persevere, we must know some things for sure. For me, what keeps me going each day are the students who walk out of my office or apartment expressing in some way that their lives have been changed. This may sound like a cliché or overly simple, but for now, knowing that I have fed my internal fire to create safe spaces for students to explore who they are and where they are going is all that I need to know.

What Can I Do?

Jacque

So, what can I do with this minute amount of information that I know? I can listen to others' stories and reflect honestly on their questions. I can support students' decisions and voice my concerns. Learning how to balance these actions is not always easy. Sometimes, I think I sit too quietly. Sometimes, I tell too much of my own story. At times I find it difficult to support decisions and all too easy to voice my concerns. I believe I am fortunate, however, to have students in my life who will confront me when I fall too often into this pattern. I appreciate them tremendously and continuously learn from them.

In order to accomplish what is described above, sometimes I wonder if I have to stay in the same position as it seems evident that other positions do not offer the same opportunities to work as closely with students. I wonder if I should take advantage of other professional opportunities, not only to enhance my current skill base, but to pave the way for future positions. If I do this, though, I wonder if it will take me further from relationship building and closer to solely administrative success. Should "moving up the ladder" be my goal if I enjoy and excel at the job I currently have? I do not have an answer to this question. I wonder, Judy, if you could go back twenty years, would your answer to this question be clearer, knowing what you know now?

Perhaps I can also increase my sphere of influence by incorporating the experiences of my peers in order to help students in their growth and education, even though this is frightening to me. My peers have their own experiences from which they have learned what they know and what they can do. In the small amount of time I see them, how can I share my experiences and explore theirs with them? This idea is a surprising response to the above question, but also telling of my own boundaries and areas for growth.

Judy

I love the questions you raise, Jacque, about whether or not climbing the ladder is an indication of success, and whether or not that guarantees you will always be in the "best job for you." Yes, I thought of that often as a new professional! I spent six years in an entry-level position, and watched, somewhat uncomfortably, all of my graduate school colleagues move into more advanced positions much earlier than I did. What comforted me, however, was the knowledge that I would never again have a chance to serve in this profession on the "front lines," and I knew how sacred that experience was for me. Every department in the world of academia offers unique opportunities to impact students' lives and contribute to their growth, but I do believe that living in the residence halls with students is an experience unlike any other in this profession. It is not surprising that live-in positions lead to burnout, but for the right person it is so much more than a job.

I think part of the reason we have connected in the way that we have is because I have approached my job in a very similar manner to the way that you do. I cherished the moments I spent talking, dining, laughing, and watching movies with students inside my home. I sometimes wonder today if I should have been more conscious of boundaries in my relationships with students as I did become very close to so many of them, and I did not take a lot of time for myself. Today, however, I think we have become much more preoccupied with boundaries than bridges. Perhaps I was too immersed in students' lives, but I have few regrets about the way I approached my work as a live-in staff member.

What I can do at this point in my career is not as clear to me as it was in my early days as a residence director at Ithaca College. At times, my work feels so disconnected from students. I understand that the design of a residence hall has a significant impact on the social and academic lives of students, but when I am sitting in a meeting talking about such issues, I am keenly aware that I would rather be sitting across the table from a student talking about his or her experiences than discussing the color of the bricks that will decorate a future residence hall.

I have always found it fascinating that those who make the most important decisions about students' lives are the most removed from them. While I still have some level of access to students, and I think students find me approachable (hey, I watch *The Real World*), I do not know them in the way that I once did. Some of this is due to the fact that I am old enough to be the mother of today's students, but it can most certainly also be attributed to the amount of time I spend with students each day. I try to reason that I have as much impact on them as I once did because my sphere of influence has grown and changed, but I truly believe that it is not academic or social programs that change the lives of students; it is relationships.

I am concerned for the future of residence life because I have seen the way relationships between residence directors and students have changed over the years, largely because of the technology boom. While I fear sounding like a dinosaur, when I became a residence director, computers were a relatively new luxury. There was no instant messenger, no cell phones, no text messaging, and no expanded cable stations in every room. We gathered in lounges. We spoke to each other in person. We often expressed our feelings for each other in cards or letters. I try so hard to communicate what has been lost to residence directors today. I think residence directors and students are being shortchanged. I witness the technology that residence directors use to complete their responsibilities, and it seems far more time consuming than it did in my day. To be unable to “reach” a student means the student did not respond to an email. It terrifies me, frankly. I have always said that I believe the most important thing we can teach our students about their education is that it is a privilege and with that privilege comes responsibility. I am not sure we always understand our own responsibility and thus struggle with how we can communicate this with students. This is largely why a residence director with your values and perspective gives me so much hope.

What Can I Hope?

Judy

Of the three questions we are addressing, I find this one to be the most compelling. Prior to getting my doctorate from the University of Vermont, I answered this question eight years ago when I was writing my dissertation. The following is an excerpt:

The presiding philosophy of the pre-sixties universities was in loco parentis (in place of parents). In those days students who violated curfew would arrive back at their dorms only to be greeted by a disapproving housemother. That same housemother might be found another day baking cookies for the students she had grown to love, holding the hand of a homesick freshman, or attempting to heal a broken heart left behind by a failed romance. Following the upheaval of the 1960's in loco parentis was replaced with a more progressive philosophy that emphasized student responsibility. While clearly standards for student behavior did not go by the wayside, administrators began to take a more hands off approach in an effort to become less parental thereby encouraging increased autonomy. In theory this seems appropriate, but I admit I resonate with Willimon and Naylor's question; has our abandonment of in loco parentis become an excuse to abandon our students? I admit I fear sounding old-fashioned and conservative, but I wonder what did we lose when we lost our housemothers? My friend and colleague in student affairs, Hugh, often suggests to me that we should do a program at ACPA entitled “The Lost Art of Shooting the Shit with Students.” Perhaps we would need to clean up the title, but in theory I find it a refreshing idea. Have we lost the art of conversing with students? Have we become more concerned with establishing boundaries than building bridges? (Raper, 1999, p. 126)

Later I quote David Hoekema, who writes:

The typical college...proclaims its lofty goal of building responsible citizens and nurturing the sense of moral and social accountability only in the first few pages of the catalog, while its actions carry another message...which might be summarized thus: “We have excellent scholars for our faculty, maintain a good library, and fill the flower beds for parents' weekend; and we sincerely hope that the students will turn out all right.” (as cited by Raper, 1999, pp. 126-127)

We must do more than hope. We must act, but our actions should begin with hope. Just as every new parent has hopes and dreams for his or her newborn child, we must have hopes and dreams for the kind of experience that we wish to provide our students. Our hope must translate into knowledge and action.

Prior to writing my dissertation, I had never experienced campus life from the perspective of an upper level administrator. My experience these past seven years has not altered my hopes, but it has, perhaps, made me a bit more cynical. The percentage of time I have to devote to student relationships has decreased dramatically. With the time I do have to give to student relationships, I spend the majority of it with just a handful of students. Indeed my sphere of influence has changed, but I am buoyed by young professionals like you, Jacque, who attend to the incredibly important business of cultivating dreams and relationships with students. I trust your input as I make potentially life-altering decisions about their lives. I accept that my role in the lives of

individual students has diminished, but my role in the lives of the collective student body is greater than it was before. I even try to accept that my increased distance from students will often lead to their misinterpretation or misunderstanding of my decisions. For most of us in student affairs, our evolution in this profession spans from front line professional to administrator. Perhaps it is toward the end of our careers that hope becomes even more necessary as we turn over the reins to enthusiastic and optimistic young professionals.

In that regard, I think my hopes have changed very little from the time when I first wrote of them in my dissertation. I hope that we can learn to see the divine in our students and honor them for their sanctity. I hope that we can find the courage to break down the barriers that have become obstacles to creating meaningful relationships with students. I hope we can become willing to inquire about their hopes, values, beliefs, dreams, and most importantly, their questions. I hope we can put agendas and egos aside and become as willing to express the unknown as we are to profess the known. Only then will we be able to offer an education that fosters a sense of awe, mystery, purpose, and even delight. Only then will we be able to offer the kind of education that not only informs, but also transforms our students' lives.

Jacque

Transforming students' lives is by far my biggest hope. As I accept your reins, I try to keep that goal at the front of my mind. My hope is to create a space for students where they feel free enough to just be who they are. Be funny, be quirky, be socially awkward, be beautiful, be strong, be weak, be sad, be true. I believe that if during the unique years of college when students have opportunities to genuinely explore themselves, they will lead much fuller and more fulfilling lives. How I do this is hopefully clear from the second question in this article. However, I realize it is not only my responsibility. Students have to be willing to stop and reflect on questions, decisions, and purpose. It is my hope that students take advantage of their college years to do just that.

It is also my hope that students realize the consequences of not taking the time to do these things. Sometimes it seems students fill their schedules so much that they barely have time to eat meals during the day. They do not leave time to hang out with friends and talk about their classes, homework, or thoughts. When I prod students to think about what might happen if they did not push themselves so hard, they often indicate they believe they will be left behind and not acquire the position or degree they desire most. What I believe is that this will do just the opposite. If students do not figure out who they are and what they are working toward, they will become at most mediocre: the same as everyone else. They will have a solid résumé, but no personality, passion, or desire. Sooner or later, they will realize that they have put a lot of time and energy into trying to be what others (family, friends, media, etc.) told them they should be. It is my hope that students stop and realize this. I hope that they realize the potential their peers present, ask each other questions, and pay attention to the web of thoughts they create.

Perhaps I paint a sullen picture, but I have these hopes because I have connected with students who do things differently. I have witnessed students experience the wonder and awe that accompany the realization that they can make their own decisions. I love to hear a student say, "I changed my major during my senior year because I realized what made me happy. I had the courage to tell my parents, and I do not know if they understood, but I am doing it anyway." I have heard this sentiment from more than one student, and it makes me happy because it indicates that this student has decided to listen to his or her heart. Taking steps of courage such as this is what I hope for all students. I hope that I can facilitate this reflection in some way.

It is my hope that others who work in institutions see the value in similar experiences. Perhaps classes can be created in order to encourage this enlightenment that students have the freedom to live differently than others expect. Perhaps those in residence life positions will find a healthy balance between administrative work and relationship building. These are some decisions that people with whom I may never have contact will be making. I hope that they have not passed the reins too soon, and remember where students are coming from and where their potential can lead them.

Conclusion

As a final reflection and conclusion, we both have realized one tremendous value of this endeavor was putting our experiences in writing and allowing for the kind of reflection we do not usually make time for. It has been almost seven years since Judy was a doctoral student and a year since Jacques was a graduate student. We agree that one of the benefits of our experiences as students was that we made time to write. Each of us reflects differently, but reflection expressed through writing has always been the most powerful for each of us, and we are grateful for this opportunity.

It has been a while since Judy wrote an article for *The Vermont Connection* and to do so with someone who shares her UVM roots has been extremely gratifying. She will never forget or take for granted the foundation that the UVM HESA program gave to her. Every preparation program is flawed, but Judy believes that UVM offers its future student affairs professionals a sense of roots and passion for this work that might be unparalleled. The core values she has as a professional today are the ones she developed in her time at UVM. The promise that talented professionals like Jacques present gives her hope and confidence that the field will continue to attract passionate, intelligent individuals that will never let any of us forget what we, as student affairs professionals, are here to do. Her greatest hope for Jacques, and this profession, is that she never lose sight of the opportunity afforded to us—to transform and be transformed by young people who, through the privilege of education, will leave a long lasting handprint on the heart of the world in which we live. It is indeed a great gift to get paid to do something that allows us to make an impact on others as well as be impacted by them in return.

This piece is Jacques's second article for *The Vermont Connection*. This time around it brought more clearly into focus how and why she puts into practice what she set out to learn the day she entered the HESA program at UVM. She is extremely grateful for the opportunity to work for someone who fully believes in and makes decisions based on students' needs and values. If not for these shared values, Jacques's ability to do her job well would be compromised.

Our hope is that readers of this article walk away knowing that the possibility exists to work with other student affairs professionals who have common values, even though they may be generations apart. Through working together and writing about our experiences, we have learned that directors and entry-level professionals can support and encourage each other; it is this collaboration that makes working for and with students an enriching profession. While our relationships with students are paramount to our understanding of the field and professional fulfillment, we must never lose sight of the motivation offered by our relationships with each other.

References

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