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Jerry Flanagan

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Thirty Years and a Daughter Later

Jerry Flanagan¹

A graduate of the HESA program reflects on what the experience meant to him when he started it thirty years ago and how it has enriched his personal and professional life since he enrolled. He will write about the trends he has witnessed in higher education and student affairs as a professional who entered the field just as "student affairs" was being recognized as a legitimate profession.

The "old days" were always better - or were they? During the past year I have had the opportunity to ask myself this question about the HESA program. The reason I have thought about this is that I have a daughter currently enrolled in the program. In addition, I have had the good fortune to have a HESA practicum student work with me almost every semester since I graduated from the program in 1973.

I will admit at the outset of this reflection that my assessment is, for the most part, subjective in nature. It is also dependent on a memory of the past, which is admittedly not as clear as it once was. With these qualifiers stated, let me begin.

In the fall of 1971, after my graduation from Saint Michael's College, I entered the graduate program of Personnel Services in Higher Education (now called Higher Education and Student Affairs) at The University of Vermont (UVM). Since the program was nested in the College of Education, counseling courses were available. I planned to use the degree to become a guidance counselor and coach at the secondary school level. Along the way, my career plans changed to focus on higher education, where I have been a professional for nearly thirty years. I credit this change in direction to the experiences I had, both inside and outside of the classroom, during my two years in the program.

Although my classroom performance at Saint Michael's was satisfactory, I did not consider myself an academic. I suspect that when my application for admission to graduate study was reviewed, I was a more attractive candidate because of the practical experience in student services I had acquired (two years as a resident assistant and one as a head resident at Saint Michael's) than the test scores and undergraduate record I presented. In addition, I had worked in Saint Michael's Dean of Students office for a few years, and I was fortunate to know other Saint Michael's graduates who were in or had graduated from the UVM program.

When I began the program, I was assigned to Wills Hall as a resident director. I was well prepared for this part of the experience and looked forward to learning the theory that should inform and guide me in my work - my student personnel philosophy. After the first semester of course work, I realized that I was less attracted to the counseling courses and more interested in those related to higher education. As a result, I gave up my goal of becoming a guidance counselor and turned my focus to a career in student services. I know that my interactions with people like Keith Miser and John Moore, among others, played a very important role in this change of heart. Keith, John, and my practicum supervisors embodied "theory to practice" in their daily work with students. It was this practice that I chose to emulate.

In the spring 1995 edition of this journal, Robert Nash and Jackie Gribbons wrote their reflections on 25 years of the program. When I re-read the article recently, a flood of great memories came rushing back to me. And, in a way, they help to confirm my sense of the changes that I have observed through my contacts with students in the program.

I was fortunate to be admitted to the program in its early years when it was less well known and not as selective as it is today. The first program chair, Kenneth Saurman, was my advisor. I had a very good relationship with him and the others who were instrumental to the program and my own development - Jackie Gribbons, Keith Miser, John Moore, Robert Nash (we called him Bob when we played basketball) and many others. In those years, the balance between practical and classroom learning was tilted much more toward the practical. I understand that the position of area

Jerry Flanagan graduated from Saint Michael's College in 1971 with a degree in Political Science. He was awarded a Master of Education in Student Personnel Services in Higher Education from The University of Vermont in 1973. He is currently the Vice President for Admission and Enrollment Management at Saint Michael's College.

coordinator which some of us held in our second year of the program is now held by professionals whom have already attained their masters degree. This change, I am sure, creates a more advantageous experience for both the students and the institution. However, I think we learned a lot, we did a good job (for modest compensation!), and we were able to add to our resume another professional position.

Since my graduation, I have had the pleasure and benefit of regular contact with the program through practicum students. Almost every semester I have had a student in my office. I have enjoyed getting to know them and hearing what they are learning and discussing in their classes. In fact, I have been able to add a number of my former practicum students to my staff at Saint Michael's. We are very fortunate to have them.

My sense is that each year the students are smarter. I don't know if that is actually the case, but I have certainly found myself increasingly impressed with HESA students' academic backgrounds over the years. They are serious about their academic work, possess good communication skills, and are at ease with technology. This latter area is something I wish I were more knowledgeable about. For good or bad, this was not available to us at the time.

Comparing my classmates to the students in the program today, I do see similarities. All of us came to the program to better understand the educational environment in which we planned to enter as professionals. We wanted to learn the history of the academy and the relatively young profession known as Student Personnel Services. In addition, we hoped to discover through our assistantships and practicums the specific area in which we wanted to work. Some discovered their calling and have been involved in their area of interest since graduation. Others discovered that they should seek alternative careers. Most, I suspect, would state that they were happy that they did the program regardless of their ultimate career path.

This past year, I have been drawn back to my days in the program as I talk with my daughter about her experience. Of course, we debate about which of us had the better experience. I have concluded from our discussions and my observations that we both share common elements but that there are important differences between the Student Personnel program of the 70s and the HESA program of today.

Those of us in the early years of the program spent more time in the practical applications of the profession and tried to "fit in" the requirements of the curriculum. In a few instances, the demands of our work prevented us from taking advantage of some of the "academic extras" we could or should have included in our time at UVM, such as the many presentations and lectures on campus. We covered the same course work but not with the depth and breadth of today's students.

I suppose that one explanation for this difference is that the discipline was very young and the scholarship less available. The current generation of students has the benefit of all the work and study that has been done in the field over the last thirty years. They also have more student services professionals to learn from and to mentor them.

Another major difference I observe is a lack of work experience in many of today's HESA students. Although many in my class joined the program right out of their undergraduate institution, most had a developed sense of what work and its related expectations were all about. I see much less of that today and think that the HESA program could benefit from enrolling more students with real world experience between their undergraduate and graduate programs.

In addition, the faculty and mentors of the program must continually examine what should be the right balance of the formal academic demands and the practical experience their students need in order to get that first job and develop the necessary skills to do the work. As we all know, it is a delicate balance. While students need to gain practical experience in order to make them attractive in the job market, they must also realize that the time available to study student affairs theory will be almost nonexistent once they enter their professional lives.

In closing, I am very proud to have a member of my family in the HESA program at UVM. My daughter seems to be getting a great deal out of the experience, and I certainly enjoy our discussions. And yet, despite the improvements in the academic quality of the program and the talents of the students enrolled, I am still biased toward "the good old days" of Student Personnel Services. Admittedly this feeling may largely be due to nostalgia, but after 30 years in higher education, I think I'm allowed to be sentimental. I hope you'll agree.