



A Search for Meaning: Integrating Service into Departmental Culture

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"If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader." - -John Quincy Adams

"I start with the premise that the function of leadership is to produce more leaders, not more followers." --Ralph Nader

"A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives." --Jackie Robinson

Finding myself at a professional crossroads of sorts, I had to make a choice. On one hand, I held a position that I worked hard to create and in my mind knew many people would not leave. I managed a large, beautiful, state of the art facility at a mid-sized four year institution. I had an ample staff that functioned autonomously, excellent student employees, a healthy budget, etc. The campus, vibrant and growing, was in an area known for its natural beauty. On top of those positives, my family was happy and active in the community. Not a bad situation, right?

On the other hand, I had been asked to come and work at a small two year college in Southern Maryland. Prior to my visit, I was unaware what part of the state constituted "Southern" Maryland. One of my friends offered the insight that Southern Maryland wasn't the end of the world but you could see it from there! The position offered was Chair of the Wellness, Fitness and Sports department. The budget was small and the facility about one-third the size and forty-five years older than the one I was currently managing. The staffing level was inadequate to meet the departmental goals, and the position I would be assuming had been vacant for about eighteen months. I also would have the pleasure of informing my pregnant wife that she and our two toddlers would be moving just after getting our house "just right".

Easy decision right?

Actually it was a no brainer, and I excitedly assumed my new position in October of last year. The essential issue facing me was something that we all face from time to time. We work diligently to get to a point where we can relax, not face daily crises and enjoy the view. When I found myself in that all too glorious position, my patience level lasted

about three days until I was breaking things just to fix them! Seeming it was this lack of mental stability that led me here and the writing of this presentation paper. The choice was simple; be challenged and grow or remain safe and become stagnant. More importantly, if personal development is what I preach to my students and staff, could I justify standing still?

Certainly the theoretical research supports the notion. Chickering, Baxter-Margolis and others have given us reams of data supporting the developmental theory for college students. We hear about the successes and failures from our colleagues. Some things work naturally and we observe the “AH-HA” moment. Many times things falter, and we wonder what went wrong. With all the discussion, my question is this: Why aren't we putting all of our energy and resources into creating situations that challenge students in a similar way? When we talk of collaboration, why aren't we doing it at a level greater than an occasional program or service? How can we take our unique circumstances and make them flow together for the maximum impact?

I have heard many reasons given for why it is not happening: lack of time, lack of student interest, lack of resources, etc. It would be both presumptuous and speculative of someone to question the validity of such reasons without knowing individual circumstances, and so I offer this presentation as a personal response to my own inquiry. I changed my professional position to see if my beliefs held water in practice and not just in theory. I changed my position because it looked like an opportunity to create. How often do we receive that chance?

As I described the differences between my former and current position, I left out one critical piece of the decision-making puzzle. That missing piece was support. While I don't have the breadth and depth of resources in terms of facilities, money or people, I gained something more valuable. That something is a canvas upon which I can paint more freely than anywhere else in my professional life. That feeling however, is a familiar one. I had it twenty years ago as I set out on my own to make a life. I had the ability to make choices. Some turned out better than others. The difference in my excitement at this point is in what I have learned about going through the process. I recognize from experience that knowing one's values, direction and intended outcomes makes decision making so much easier. Why didn't anyone tell me this before now? The possible answers to that question led me to another question: Why aren't we telling our current students the things we know they need to guide them in their journey?

The intent of this presentation is not to supply the answers that will tie together student development, service learning and engagement into a neat bundle that everyone can use as a model. If I could provide that, I would be presenting the information to Oprah right now. It is the intent of this presentation to share with you the journey upon which I am embarking with my teammates, students and key collaborative partners on my campus. It is a discussion that would have helped me twenty years ago as much as it helps me today, and I sincerely hope that it helps all of you.