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Student Affairs: An Educational Process

Introduction:

Over the past five years I have held a variety of positions in the field of student affairs. Although I have learned to handle a number of situations, there has been one factor within each of them that has remained constant; each was a learning experience. Working within student affairs is a progressive learning process, once I felt I had mastered one area, I began to learn in another. But within the process there were a number of people who acted as teachers and helped me learn as I helped others begin their learning process. This essay will look at student affairs as an actual learning process rather than something that is simply accomplished through hard work and training.

Basic Skills:

The basic skills acquired through this learning activity will be extremely useful to students and professionals as learners throughout their lives. People who work in student affairs are exposed to a variety of viewpoints and ideas that may differ from their own. Besides gaining this experience, student affairs workers gain other practical skills such as time management, communication, and how to effectively handle confrontations. Regardless of the issue, whether it is a simple roommate conflict or a heart pounding life and death situation, each event offers a unique learning experience to everyone involved.

Student Affairs: Collectively Promoting Creativity and Individuality:

Although consistency is extremely important in determining which situations will be responded to and what sanctions will be imposed, individualism and creativity are strongly encouraged within student affairs. Shortly after entering the field, a person's individual style begins to emerge. Rather than try to suppress these individual styles, students are encouraged to

explore which techniques and approaches they feel most comfortable with when confronting a particular situation. By incorporating these new ideas and different styles, staff members can learn from one another and share the successes and failures they have experienced. Although it may seem that within the hierarchy of student affairs new members' ideas would not be supported, it is actually the exact opposite. By being open to new, fresh ideas, directors and advisors enter into a mutually beneficial, learning relationship. Each individual becomes a member of a learning team, made up of individual members working towards a common goal, who learn from and support one another.

Within this team, each individual is encouraged to explore new ideas and approaches of how to solve a common problem. The best way to be creative is by recognizing student affairs as a learning process and taking on the four roles of explorer, artist, judge, and warrior, which have been recommended by Roger Von Oech in *A Kick in the Seat of the Pants* (Von Oech, 1986). By utilizing these roles, people who work in student affairs can learn how to become more creative and empowered to try new techniques at confronting issues that at one time may have seemed to have simple, clear cut solutions.

Student Affairs: The Four Roles

The Explorer.

The explorer is one of the most important roles within student affairs. If people neglected to use this part of their creative team, the field would stagnate resulting in the neglect of students' needs. If the field only practiced what had been tested and proven, there would be no opportunity for learning conversations or expansion of any of the existing ideas. By allowing directors and advisors to be curious and creative, the field is allowed to expand and adapt to the needs of students (Von Oech, 1986). Although everyone who works in student affairs is provided with some basic training, how each situation is handled is as unique as each individual. When I started working as an assistant to the director, I thought that everything I needed to know would come out of my training. However I soon discovered that I had only been

given a basic outline that in order to be completed, I would need to develop my own individual style when confronting a variety of issues. In order to begin this process, I called upon my explorer to come up with more information that further enhanced the training I had received. I began to brainstorm through a number of ideas as to how the needs of the students could be better met. I wanted to create a system in which the students needs were determined by the themselves rather than a central office. I also wanted the students to be able to decide what living environment they were comfortable with rather than having one determined for them. For example by letting students determine how quiet hour rules would be enforced they would have an opportunity to determine the characteristics of their own living environment. But now that I had sufficient information, I needed to learn how these ideas could be implemented in order to benefit students.

The Artist:

After I had gained enough information about the issues that confront students and how others had handled them, I began to use my artist to come up with new plans as to how these issues could be better addressed. I had relied heavily on the explorer to come up with the best possible information, but now I needed a course of action, something that could work to meet the needs of the students. I started learning more about some of the most common situations, things like room mate conflicts, alcohol awareness, personal health and safety, and homesickness. Once I had gained enough information about each of these issues by talking with students as well as a number of student advisors, I began to come up with new ideas as to how they could be addressed in a manner that students' needs would be met. I worked on creating programs that addressed a number of serious issues that affected students lives in an educational manner. Rather than having the students attend another lecture, I began to think of ways to implement active learning within student programming. Instead of blindly punishing a student for violating a university policy, I tried to think of ways in which the situation could be turned into a learning opportunity. I decided that when a student violated a policy I would try to treat

them as a learner rather than some kind of criminal. In order to approach them, I tried to focus on something I thought they might be interested in and discover more about them as a person rather than simply discussing what they did wrong. In a recent indecent exposure case, I discussed interests, hobbies, sports, and future plans with the student before discussing the policy violation. Finally, when I began to discuss the violation I discovered that I had earned the respect of the student and had a lot more rapport with the student compared to if I had just approached him about the policy infraction.

The Judge:

Within student affairs the role of the judge is extremely important. Without this role, self organized learning and effective self evaluation become impossible (Harri-Augstein & Thomas, 1991). In this case, utilizing the role of the judge allowed me to effectively evaluate whether or not my ideas would work in a real life scenario. In order to accomplish this task, I consulted my director, student advisors, and residents about how effective they felt these ideas would be at accomplishing my goals. In particular I was concerned with the programming aspect of the position as it was important for the advisors to be able to effectively inform their residents. I knew that in order to be successful, the program had to spark the interest of the students who would attend. Although I had asked a number of students and advisors whether or not they would be interested in a number of topics, the only real way of knowing would be to present the program itself. In order to accomplish this task, I needed to call upon my fourth role, the warrior.

The Warrior:

Although each of these four roles are extremely important, without a sufficient warrior, all of the good ideas and analysis can never be realized. Although others may take your ideas and act upon them, their analysis and interpretation will never be your own. After my judge had determined that my plans were relatively solid and finally needed to be tested, I determined the best way to begin was with a program on multi-culturalism. It was an idea that many people I

had talked with had seemed interested in and many of the current political struggles seemed to be fueling the argument. I soon met with a programming team made up of several student advisors to consult and work with in bringing about a number of the ideas I had come up with. But I quickly discovered that many of the ideas I had were being enhanced and brought to life by my team of student advisors. We often discussed different ways of creating signs in order to make them more cost effective, or how to get students more involved in the program. I found that by enabling my warrior, my judge, artist, and explorer were also called into action. Not to necessarily come up with new ideas, but to enhance and expand upon current ones. Soon I found myself implementing ideas I once only dreamed of, creating programming groups effectively, addressing resident concerns, guiding and learning from my advisors. The night of the program approached, about fifty people showed up, and it was determined to be a great success. But more importantly, I had finally accomplished a dream I had five years earlier through the work of a dedicated learning team.

Student Affairs: An Educational Process

Although the program had been a success, the learning experience had not ended. In fact it has continued up until this day as I continue to work as the assistant to the director. In supervising twenty student advisors, I find that I am constantly utilizing skills that I have learned in my education classes. I have to continually assess the advisors' learning, their individual styles, and skills. I often ask myself what did the advisors learn and how can they effectively demonstrate what they have learned (Martin, 1998). By doing so I am able to recognize my own individual learning process as well as the four roles of creativity that need to be utilized in order to perform effectively (Von Oech, 1986). Finally, I need to be able to overcome my personal myths regarding the learning process as well as my abilities to effectively perform in my current position (Harri-Augstein & Thomas, 1991).

Implementing TOTE (Test Operate Test Exit):

The TOTE system involves four steps that help demonstrate whether or not a learner has mastered a specific learning event. The first step is the Testing stage in which you determine how well you understand and can implement a certain skill. The second is the Operation stage in which you try to enhance your performance by improving upon the results of the previous test. Next is the second Testing stage in which you evaluate how your performance has improved since the previous test. If this phase demonstrates that you have successfully mastered this task, the fourth stage, Exit, is then utilized. However if this Testing stage demonstrates some need for further improvement, then stages two and three can be repeated until the skill is mastered.

When I first learned of the TOTE system from my fiance it was something that I was extremely interested in (Harri-Augstein & Thomas, 1991). At the time I was working as a student advisor, but I was preparing to take my new position as assistant to the director in the following months and saw it as a powerful tool that could be modified and utilized within student affairs. By implementing this tool, directors as educators are able to effectively analyze the learning behavior of the student advisors.

In order to accomplish this a simulation is created during student advisor training week in which a number of typical situations are re-created in a controlled environment. This simulation represents the initial Testing stage within the TOTE system. While the returning staff act like residents, the new student advisors are asked to effectively handle each situation. Although they may not always succeed in resolving the problems at hand, the student advisors learn how to effectively handle a variety of "real life" situations. Next is the Operation stage which occurs after the simulation in which the student advisors will reflect on the mistakes they made in the simulation and work to correct them. During the next Test stage they will face a real life situation in which once again their performance will be evaluated. Finally, their directors will evaluate the student advisor and determine whether they were able to expand upon what they had learned in training, or if they continued to make the same mistakes. If they had corrected the

mistakes, the testing phase is completed as the advisor has successfully mastered the skills needed to effectively handle a particular situation. At this point the advisor can move on to the Exit stage, and begin the TOTE process again in order to master a new skill. However if they continued to make the same mistakes, the advisor and director will discuss how to effectively handle future situations and repeat the second and third stages until the advisor has mastered a particular skill. Finally, after learning the basic skills, the student advisor becomes an educator to his or her fellow advisors and helps them continue with their learning process.

References:

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