

Know Thyself to Know Thy Job

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The chair was historic, or so I liked to think. It had welcomed the sitting of many from the last few generations of students in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) program at the University of Vermont. The more I sat in that spot, the more I felt I was becoming a part of the community of scholars, activists, teachers, and learners who had gone before me. Like my predecessors, I sat each time facing west. Each time, seeing the view out the window over College Street, across the tops of buildings. Each time, curious what story the day would bring. This particular day I had a set of choices to make about leaving Vermont. Across the table was the person I came to see for advice; Jackie Gribbons. I shared my options, Jackie listened as always, and finally she shared her thoughts: “Jess, you have to make the right decision for you for right now. What is right is likely to change. And there is nothing that will be perfectly right. So determine what you need right now, and decide.”

Plato, Shakespeare, and Gribbons all agree. “Know thyself.” “To thine own self be true.” “Know what is right for you.” The HESA curriculum and faculty infuse these ideas of self-knowledge into the pedagogy in an intentional way, and the theme of the journal this year, “Identity: From Awareness to Action,” highlights that knowledge of self-identity is key to action. When I was sitting in the chair that day, the identities that were most salient were not ones we had studied in class but were ever-present as I was making the job decision. I was (1) someone slightly in debt, (2) someone about to be married, and (3) someone who wanted a values-based job or institution with a position that provided a sense of life balance. These identities drove me to pursue certain jobs, and each position I considered ranked higher in some categories than others. What remained the same was that each position I considered needed to fit within a budget, to be near my now husband’s graduate school (then a potential of eight options), to engage my values, and to allow me to develop both a rich professional and personal life in a new city.

Since that day, I have moved through many transitions. I accepted a job, I graduated, I married, and I moved. Now, still only a few months beyond those transitions, I find myself in quite a different place but with a job that fulfils the elements that

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were important to me in my search. What is at the forefront of my mind now is how to best integrate my needs as a professional, my identity as an individual, and my values as a moral being with the needs, identity, and values of the institution, students, and colleagues I serve.

I often think about this big picture question of integrating my values and needs with that of the institution I serve, but at the same time find myself simply learning how to accomplish daily tasks. Equipped with tools for action but still a new professional, the big tasks of learning organizational structure, understanding departmental priorities, and developing a sense of campus culture all occur alongside the important but small tasks of finding the office supply closet, learning how to operate the shredder, and collecting all the appropriate office keys. In this stage of learning, I find that I fall in the middle of the progressive professional and personal journey this year's theme evokes. Equipped with tools from Vermont to grow in self and community awareness but not yet immersed in a campus culture to a degree that I feel comfortable acting broadly, I fall within the "to" of this year's theme. Some days I can almost literally feel the transition I am making between awareness to action—a transition that accompanies my journey from graduate school to the working world. While action is also a part of study, and awareness-building is a lifetime process, the focus has shifted for me to one of putting the tools of awareness and knowledge of scholarship into action as a professional. I pull out a book or notes from class to help me understand a student's developmental situation. I reflect on essays I wrote to help me put my identity in perspective. Or I make a mistake that requires me to think intentionally about the actions I take.

Settling in: Mistakes, Uncertainty, and Development

Boy have I made some mistakes. Some have been funny; I selected "reply all" to a message meant for my supervisor to say, "We're cool for the BBQ!" Some have weighed on my mind long after the repercussions settled; I was missing information that I should have researched when advising a student group on how to handle a judicial situation. Probably once a week, I have needed to admit to a mistake, big or small. More often than that, I have had to admit my uncertainty or my lack of knowledge about an aspect of my job. "Where is that room?" "What is the appropriate way to respond to this problem?" "Do I really need to follow these guidelines or are these suggestions?" "Is my judgement out of line?" "Did I phrase this e-mail appropriately?"

The mistakes and moments of uncertainty have given me a productive perspective on my role within an organization and my identity as a new professional. With each answer to a question or with each mistake, I have watched my own development unfold. Learning and self-awareness have occurred in those moments when

I have paused in my daily tasks to consider my actions or inactions, my values, the values of the campus I serve, and how I can mold those elements together into cohesive action.

The mistakes and moments of uncertainty foster in me what I hope is a humble confidence. I recently had a chance to reflect on that humble confidence when Sister Helen Prejean, author of *Dead Man Walking*, spoke at the church I attend near campus. A line she quoted from Saint Basil remains in my daily thought: “Annunciations are frequent. Incarnations are rare.” In addition to giving me a jolt that I need to live my values intentionally, this line reminds me of the way in which I should respond to both the mistakes I have made and the uncertainty that arises in my new position. Rather than pretend I know answers, I need to ask. Rather than proclaim knowledge, I need to show my use of knowledge in each interaction. Rather than simply declare an opinion, I need to enact the philosophy that informs that opinion.

Intentional Action

Sister Prejean also left me asking a question that resurfaces throughout the week: “How did I work for justice today?” Or more broadly, “How did I act with intention today?” Without required readings to learn about new theories, without papers to draw connections between theory and practice, without classmates engaging in courses and discussions based on similar learning, I have had to work all the more to develop organic intentionality in my work with students. The visionary culture of my department and the support of colleagues and supervisors, who are role models of intentionality, fosters an environment of contemplative action. The writing, reading, and discussion that accompanies graduate school, however, are difficult to replace in a workday.

Yet again, I can see the transition I am making between the awareness-building of graduate school and an action-oriented profession. In regards to theory, I am continuing to develop the ability to integrate theory into practice without structured discussions that help me draw those connections. In his chapter “Using theory in practice in student affairs,” Rodgers (1991) discusses an aspect of the transition I am experiencing. He explores the use of theory in practice as professionals grow from comprehension of theory, to knowledge of core constructs, to the ability to use theory in a way to affect broad change. The seasoned professionals around me have moved into those later stages of intentional action; they can clearly articulate how theory and research inform their actions within, and decisions for, the institution (most recently around an alcohol policy change on campus). I am just beginning to make those connections.

Intentional action, in addition to encompassing the use of theory in practice, is also

the purposeful living out of my values. With each day, as tasks accrue alongside the problems to solve, I can easily respond and accomplish items without taking a moment to understand why and how I act. Will I act with my values in mind? Or with my desire simply to accomplish the task? A few values have surfaced repeatedly in my new job as I have, with Sister Prejean's inspiration, paused to consider how my values affect my daily decisions. One of these is my belief in the dignity of each individual. Each time I meet with students who have violated community standards, I think about this value and my responsibility to educate based on behaviors in order to uphold a person's worth. This value also arises as I encourage students to engage in programs and conversations that counteract prejudices, celebrate differences, and question norms. Another value is my commitment to a student-centered philosophy. When I might easily solve a problem I intentionally try to slow my work, to pause before answering, and to ask a student, "What do you think? What would you do with these options?" This action has sometimes been difficult for me, especially as a new professional trying to learn new protocol and wanting to prove my ability to make decisions within those guidelines. Keeping this student-centered approach in mind however, has become one of the ways in which I try to ensure that my values guide my actions.

The Road Ahead

Education and values have been useful tools as I begin the journey into a new job as a new professional, moving from the awareness-building of graduate school to the action of the professional world. My mistakes have been many and my uncertainty has been constant, but each has helped me gain perspective on my position and understanding of expectations. I have tried to incorporate my lessons from those experiences of growth with intentional, values-based work and decision making. The reflections on my mistakes, my growth, and my work have given me a window from which to view the transitions of the last few months and to feel, almost tangibly, the process of the transition to action within a framework of awareness. The reflections have also reminded me of Jackie's wisdom; I need to know myself and my needs in this moment. I change as my surroundings change, and so should my approach to my work as I grow, learn, and hopefully become more aware of myself and of those around me.

The chair that I sit in most frequently each day now is still near the window. It faces south and looks out onto a busy sidewalk. It also has a history of those who have sat in it: curious, frustrated, confident, calm, and humorous. Some who have sat before me have left notes on lips of drawers or on desk edges: "Listen. Understand. Then respond." The chair I frequented in Vermont and the chair in which I now sit provide a sense of rootedness for me. One has been the place from which I have asked deep questions about myself and one from which I have asked questions of others trying to know themselves. These chairs have been places

for both individuality or self-understanding and places where I have entered into a community and a ritual. These chairs have also been the places from which I have begun the transition from gatherer to enactor.

My hope is that with each chair ahead, I find myself as I do now, in a place seeking to move from awareness to action and to enter a community of learners and actors that inspires my best self. That I may incarnate what I announce. That I may know not only myself, but a version of myself that is made greater by the mistakes I have made, the uncertainty I have encountered, the values I have engaged, and the communities I have shared. That the chair itself will provide a place to reflect when I take the time to pause, sit, and ask.

References

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