

A Bird's Eye View

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As a passionate member of the growing ranks of the alumni of the University of Vermont, I am so pleased to have an opportunity to provide some insights from my current perspective. Having received my master's degree from one of the top programs for Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration, I am always tremendously proud of my education, of the network of colleagues that I have, and the current program at UVM. During the past year I have had the honor to serve as NASPA president, and I have had numerous interactions with other alumni, some whom I know and some whom I have just met, but each encounter begins with that knowing and appreciative smile.

I traveled from one regional conference to another last November, with a stop in Burlington, Vermont for the 35th Annual NASPA Region I Conference. As I flew in over Lake Champlain the memories washed over me and I realized it was truly in Vermont that I planted my roots for my professional development. The differences in the landscape as I had flown from Pennsylvania to New England were truly remarkable, much like the changes I personally experienced years ago at that stage of my life. The flight in, passing over Lake Champlain and then over the campus, provided a bird's eye view of one of the most significant stops in my professional journey. Though I only spent two years in Burlington, the time and energy spent there were critical to my personal and professional development in every respect. The place is powerful, but it was the people and the relationships that carved out who I am and the role I play as a professional in student affairs. Many of the individuals who helped frame my experience have stayed in touch. A few of the most influential have not stayed in contact or have passed away. Yet, whether they are actively present or not, they still influence me today.

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The opportunity to meet some of the current HESA students during that same visit to Burlington in November of 2007 was another highlight of my journey. I watched, with great admiration, as the current HESA first year class participated in a discussion about learning models. The enthusiasm and spirit, even at the end of one of those long late-afternoon-into-evening classes, energized me in seconds. I realized that the spirit and strong connections we have as UVM alumni are developed through the opportunities that we all have in common, including classes and the varied experiences in the UVM higher education community. I was invited to share my professional philosophy with the class and then invited again to contribute to this year's issue of *The Vermont Connection*. Though I have many thoughts, I will focus on three brief concepts: my UVM roots, my primary philosophy, and my passion for our students.

As a professional, the values that drive me every day are critical. In part developed through my education, who I am is central to what I do. My commitment to students, to enhancing learning, to maintaining integrity and to being intentional in my work, are essential for the focus I have in my life. The image of a tree best represents the principles that have driven me over the past years. As I have shared in numerous settings and with the first year class that November evening in Vermont, I think about the growth of a tree as a parallel to my own growth. The trunk is the core, nourished through the roots. The roots of my professional focus were cultivated in many ways while I was a graduate student in Vermont. I established priorities, developed a strong work ethic, and began to understand the breadth of students' experiences. In addition to the nurturing we received by faculty and supervisors, there was nothing more meaningful than the challenge and support from our peers. We understood what it meant to have the opportunity to be in our program at the University of Vermont at that moment. We treasured those experiences. We studied, read, and wrote like we had never done before, but for some of us, it was the practical experience in our assistantships and practica that truly made the difference.

The tree grows and it continues to build on prior experiences. The layers (the bark) add character and exhibit maturity. My core values are within the trunk and nourished through the roots. As one grows, learns, and makes critical decisions, imagine your life like that of a tree. Think of the trunk as your core, and as you learn and grow, you "branch" out. You try some things that become stable parts of your life, just like a tree trunk might split into major branches, but other times you try something and it doesn't work well. When you make decisions throughout your life you need to be sure that the most important ones are close to your core (near the trunk) and consistent with who you are inside; yet, it is also critical to remember that in order to enjoy the sunshine, the flowers or the fruit, one must occasionally go out on a limb or climb to the top. The strong decisions last and bear leaves, fruit, flowers and other branch-

es. As we learn from experience and sometimes mistakes, some branches don't last, but ones central to the core values provide support and are the foundation for future growth. One more recent observation, one I shared with a student just before I became NASPA President-elect, is that trees tend to hang out with those like them; yet, the richness of a forest or garden is most noticeable when there is diversity among the trees. This is certainly true for us as well.

It is critical for me to recognize that if I follow this philosophy, then I must go out on a limb or climb to the top in order to appreciate the experience and see the fruit, flowers, and sky (or the results of our values and decisions). The image of growth, ever-changing experiences, cycles, and strength from our core and our values inspires my work and my life. I have learned from mistakes more than successes. I question the next steps and challenge myself to higher standards. As I consider my role with students, I ask questions to assist them in thinking about the next issue they will face.

You might ask why I use a tree as the representation of my philosophy. This philosophy started in my personal interactions with students. Faced with challenging decisions, students look for advice, and the tree image can help guide them or provide a visual for their consideration about how they have grown, and will continue to grow in the future. In truth, I realized that it continues to help me as I am always learning and growing as well. I recently participated in an intensive professional development program as a faculty member. Though I was serving as a mentor, I learned as much or more about myself as I did about others, which is often one of the benefits of volunteering for these roles. I found out one of my strongest traits is being a learner. Though I am sure it was well in place before I attended UVM, it was at that time in my life that I learned how valuable learning could be for me. Life's lessons are many – memories are built on experience. John Dewey is credited with saying, "Education is a social process; education is growth; education is not a preparation for life but is life itself." So it is true with the tree, for it represents the successes and not just the journey.

Dewey is also quoted to have said, "To find out what one is fitted to do, and to secure an opportunity to do it, is the key to happiness." My passion for students, my commitment to education, and the many opportunities I have had to continue to learn from experience, colleagues, and our students, have assured me of great happiness. The time I spent learning and growing at the University of Vermont will forever be essential to who I am as a professional, but more importantly, who I am as a person. The passion I share with my staff or the students at Arcadia University is always rooted in those experiences almost 30 years ago. Looking to the future, I will continue to learn and grow, while always remembering and honoring the roots that have mattered.

So...What?
 Patrick Brown
 Director of Student Life
 University of Vermont

How and when do words and concepts develop currency? What floating factors catalytically combine to capture the current values of our communities? Does any single person hold the power of the word? Or is it created and owned by the community? And how long will the currency last?

Sustainability is one of the “words” that has emerged in higher education over the past few years. Once a word breaks through the surface and becomes part of daily conversation, weekly headlines, and conference themes, then meaning becomes a bit diffuse. There is value in stopping to reflect on these diffuse concepts to re-clarify their true meaning.

Throughout the planning and construction phases of the University of Vermont’s new 186,000 square foot student center, the Davis Center, we discussed a variety of environmentally-based terms and goals. We are striving for the Green Building Council’s Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification at the silver or gold level. The local media has featured our “sustainable” building. We proudly fly a whole Earth flag on one of our flagpoles. But what does it all really mean? And how did we get here?

The leadership of the Six Nations, known by many as the Iroquois Confederacy (or “The League of Power and Peace”), followed a written constitution that was heavily borrowed from by the writers of the United States Constitution. The Six Nations are called the *Hau de no sau nee*, meaning “People Building a Long House.” The six tribes that formed this powerful alliance of native people (Cayuga, Mohawk, Onondagas, Oneida, Seneca, and Tuscaroras) held many important and personal beliefs, one of which ties directly into how we relate to our surroundings and how we prepare for the future. The Great Law, as the constitution was called, asked a current generation of people to be mindful of, and work towards, the well being of their children seven generations in the future. The translation reads something like this: “In every deliberation we must consider the impact on the seventh generation, even if it requires having skin as thick as the bark of a pine.”

In planning for the Davis Center we often talked about the building being a

100 year building. We got it wrong. If we apply the seven generations concept to our building and sustainability, then we need to be thinking out 175 years—2182. We designed many great initiatives into this project, and are working hard to use the building as a community teaching tool, but 175 years is a really long time. How many of our daily decisions consider seven generations?

I really don't like the word sustainability. I applaud the concept, but the word is way too passive for my personal ideals. It reminds me of the difference between tolerance and acceptance in our discussions on the dynamics of social justice. Sustainability only goes far enough to maintain the status quo, when, environmentally we need to actively work to restore what once was. Reduce, reuse, recycle only go so far. We need to add a fourth R to the oft chanted set of Rs that capture environmental actions to restore our ecosystems.

Walking into the bathrooms of the Davis Center, with their waterless urinals, automatic flushing toilets, motion sensor sinks and faucets, and supersonic hand dryers I wonder what word or words best captures the values that are really behind sustainability. Thinking, somewhat egotistically, that I can coin the ultimate word (while I'd rather pose provocative questions to make us all think and discuss at a deeper level) is a risky proposition. Today, drafting this piece, I am leaning towards the word stewardship.

Social stewardship. Social begins to capture the evolving interplay between humans, other members of the animal and plant world, and the broader physical environment. Stewardship places personal responsibility with each of us to take action within that social and environmental interplay. Whereas sustainability can be a call to action, stewardship requires it. I would like to posit that social stewardship includes a wide collection of words that have currency today: social justice, environmental stewardship, environmental education, and civility. It requires attention to the dominant and subordinate relationships that exist between people and those relationships that exist between people and the land.

The new Davis Center, with one of its core values being stewardship, is attempting to serve as a role model for the campus and community. From the overall architectural design to a sophisticated heating and ventilation system that senses the number of people in a room, to a glycol heating system in the loading dock floor to a wide variety of active and passive programming, the building is trying to at least look ahead a few generations of college students. As much as a building can provide an appropriate stage, the success of the production relies upon people.

So...what?

I believe that as a student affairs educator it is critical for me to model behavior that is in concert with an ongoing process of change. I must learn to

stop, look, and listen to what is around me. Then I must think about and feel the realities before I move towards action that fulfills a stewardship mission.

What I believe is that each of us needs to think and act locally and globally. The nexus of these two geographic playgrounds is the individual. To only work in one arena limits one's inherent power and downplays the intersection. Local action starts in its purest form with one's self and moves towards what we typically call our local community. Global actions stretch into national and international issues and concerns. They are all important.

What I believe is that each of us needs to consider what and who will teach on a daily basis. Education is far more than what happens in the classroom, and we are charged with being dream-makers not gatekeepers. Our conversations must focus on the possible.

What I believe is that when using the word stewardship, it is important to keep in mind that it requires each of us to take responsibility for our own actions, and begin to use our ability to respond (responsibility) to change the actions of others.

What I believe is that we all need to question our actions on a daily basis. I also believe that we need to question, albeit carefully, the actions of others. We are in this together. Partnerships and collaborations will move us further along more successfully.

What I believe is that dialogue and action are necessary partners in our future. We need to learn how to listen and learn from others—daily.

What I believe is that we need to challenge ourselves to define our personal comfort zones, and take the risks that are inherent in taking action. And within these actions we must be genuine and authentic.

I believe that we need to listen to the poet inside, and work towards a more beautiful world.

I believe that we need to challenge our associations, institutions, divisions, departments, and colleagues to fulfill their stated missions and be the leaders of society. Leadership requires risks and setting standards that embrace stewardship principals.

I believe that peace is a noble cause and that, in spite of the numerous discourses on how to define a just war, the conversation needs more depth as I remain unconvinced. We need to engage each other and our students in these discussions. If we cannot figure out how to manage the human tragedies all around us, then how are we going to address the multitude of other needs?

I believe that it is grossly wrong to drop tons of depleted uranium tipped arms

in Iraq and Afghanistan. The half-life of depleted uranium is four billion years. Our current “war” effort in Iraq and Afghanistan is using sixteen times more fuel per soldier than in the Second World War. Beyond the explicit human toll, why are we not talking on our campuses about the environmental impact of war? Who needs to initiate this conversation? You? Me? Our faculty? Our buildings?

I believe each individual contributes to our world on a daily basis, and I know I can always do more. I also need to ask for help. I need to speak the truth. I also need to say thanks more often.

I know that I am always learning. Always learning. Working to restore.

So...what are you going to do today?