

The Art of Accompaniment: Unexpected Lessons Learned in Student Affairs

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In the third grade my class learned to play the recorder. You remember the recorder—that long, chocolate-brown, plastic cylinder with holes just small enough for little fingers to cover? The recorder: my first and only wind instrument. Our teacher showed us how to stretch our fingers over the holes and lift them in different combinations to make that little plastic tube whistle every note on the scales. I never did learn how to read music, but I could toot-toot my way through the likes of “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” and “Hot Cross Buns.” Even though I had taught myself the entire *Sound of Music* version of “Do-Re-Mi” by ear, I was no match for my friend, Michelle; she was truly talented.

A year older than me, Michelle lived around the corner. I looked upon her as Beethoven’s childhood friends must have looked upon him—with awe and wonder. As a 5-year old, Michelle composed her first work, a joyful little melody she called, “The Ladybug Waltz.” By the time Michelle and I became friends, she was astounding the judges at every recital with her mastery of classical piano’s most difficult pieces. Truth be told, she was a bit of a wunderkind. As an adult, Michelle was gifted and skilled enough to command audiences at the best symphony halls; she could have toured. Instead she chose the conservatory where she is a teacher and an accomplished accompanist.

In reflecting on “meaning making in student affairs” and what I might offer through this essay, my mind returned again and again to my childhood friend and her choice to accompany. In many ways I had always thought of my role as a student affairs professional as one who accompanies, that is, as one who is present to, or walks with, students. To accompany someone on his, her, or his journey in this way is a privilege, and certainly this is an important understanding of the role. But in remembering Michelle, the power of her example suggested a few other interpretations of what it means to accompany. I share these thoughts with you.

After completing her doctorate in Education Policy and Leadership at the University of Maryland, Michele joined Seattle University as Assistant Vice President for Student Development. Prior to this transition Michele worked for 10 years at Loyola College in Maryland, the institution she joined immediately following her graduation from HESA in 1996.

Developing Another's Talent

Michelle would tell you that one of the greatest joys of being an accompanist is found in supporting another artist, whether a vocalist or another musician, to reach the heights of his, her, or his talent. As an accompanist, Michelle uses her gifts to help others shine. As a kid, I benefitted from Michelle's accompaniment: I wailed on the recorder (whether or not that was a painful wail depends on whom you ask and how good that person's memory is) while Michelle expertly tickled the ivories. She matched my unrhythmic tempo and held chords long enough for me to find the right note. Her playing made me and my recorder sound good, and each time we played together I gained a little more confidence in my fledgling musical abilities. And isn't this akin to what we do with the students we meet and mentor?

When I think of the students I have accompanied over the years, the faces of those who were unsure at first of their own gifts flood my memory. The circumstances surrounding each student were different as were each one's needs for accompaniment. For the ones who were ready to perform in the spotlight but were afraid to walk onstage, perhaps it was the nomination to a leadership development group or the appointment to a committee that first invited them to a greater confidence. For those who had made regrettable choices but sincerely desired well-rounded success, perhaps it was the slow and sure mentoring that helped them level out the shaky tempo of their development into adulthood. Like Michelle at her piano coaxing the natural talent out of budding musicians, it has been my privilege to accompany these students; to mentor them, help them gain a better sense of self, and encourage the development of their gifts and talents.

The college years represent a rite of passage from adolescence and being shaped by the world to adulthood and having the knowledge and skills to shape the world, however large or small that world may be. How students engage life outside the classroom bears upon what type of shapers-of-the-world they become, and this is where accompaniment by student affairs professional becomes crucial. At the core of our profession is the belief in college students' holistic development—intellectually, socially, spiritually, psychologically, physically—and the unique contribution to this development that trained professionals can provide. As accompanists, we use our gifts of compassion, critical thinking, and even humor to help students develop into their adult selves.

Playing from the Same Sheet of Music

Several years ago Michelle mentioned an odd little mishap she once experienced in rehearsal. She was accompanying a vocalist who was preparing for an im-

portant audition. Michelle and the vocalist were definitely working on the same selection, but try as they might, they could not nail down some of the essential elements. Upon closer inspection, they realized they were working from different arrangements of the same piece. It was an easy-to-correct mistake, and Michelle laughed it off saying, “Talk about the importance of being on the same page!”

The parallels of Michelle’s experience to some of my own work with students are obvious. Every now and then—not often, but certainly on occasion—I have found myself slightly out of step with the students I have accompanied. When I might think the next move is a zig, the student insists on a zag. Sometimes these disagreements have happened over program content, expenses, or some other element over which I have had final authority, and these have been relatively simple to resolve. I have found out the hard way, however, that there is no “accompanist’s authority” over a student’s choices along his, her, or hir journey.

It may seem ridiculously elementary, but sometimes it is difficult to remember that the one who accompanies is not actually on the journey, especially when the one who is on the journey is diving headlong into a quagmire. From the mundane—choosing an ill-fitting major—to the serious—flirting addiction and other self-destructive behaviors—some students have made choices I have neither understood nor supported. Playing from the same sheet of music during these more thorny personal trials does not necessarily mean defaulting to the student’s choice. In these moments, to accompany is to strike a delicate balance between offering guidance and respecting each student’s personal freedom to make choices regardless of the consequences.

In the case of Michelle’s vocalist, Michelle gave her best professional advice about which arrangement would showcase the artist’s talents best. The vocalist chose her own piece against Michelle’s opinion. Although Michelle prepared her the best she could, the vocalist did not audition well. As her accompanist, Michelle was there to help the vocalist pick up the pieces, smooth out the rough areas, and begin again. And so it is with so many students.

Interpreting the Music

In the absence of a conductor, the accompanist helps the primary musicians interpret the music. When Michelle works with artists to interpret a piece—which notes they want to emphasize, which emotions they want to convey—she is helping them make and express meaning. I can think of no purpose of accompaniment that is more significant than this: to facilitate another’s process of making and expressing meaning.

In Michelle’s work, interpretation and meaning making provides a platform for

the artist to communicate something personal to the listener. In the work of student affairs, interpretation and meaning making involves coaching the student to communicate something personal to him, her, or himself. I can only assume that interpretation is one of the most rewarding aspects of Michelle's work because helping another make sense of an experience or begin to answer some of life's most vexing questions is certainly the most rewarding aspect of mine.

As much as the college years are a rite of passage for most, they are also filled with life-changing moments of doubt, surprise, and discovery. Oftentimes student affairs professionals are in the best position to help students interpret the music of their lives. We accompany the student who is bewildered by being far away from home while his parent is suffering from terminal cancer; we comfort the student who experiences rejection from a relationship, a job, or graduate school; we counsel the student who seriously wonders about her life's purpose. These are some of my most treasured interactions with students, and I am willing to bet that my colleagues around the nation would agree.

To accompany another is a great privilege, and to be accompanied is a great blessing. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the mentors who have accompanied me along my journey. Their wise and caring counsel has guided my own meaning making, and it is because of them that I have these words to share with you.