

Lessons Learned

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When I reconnect with colleagues or meet new colleagues, people often tell me that they remember one thing about me - I know what it means to live a balanced life and I have learned what it takes to remain in the profession. Charlie Warner and I have often been asked to do our program called "Lessons Learned." In this article we will provide our top ten in regard to why we do what we do; where we find fulfillment working in the fraternity and sorority community; how we are intentional in the work we do on a daily basis; and how we sustain ourselves in the ever-changing environment called higher education.

"Success is a journey not a destination" Arthur Rober Ash Jr.

Lessons Learned: Charlie Warner

- 1. Enjoy the experience every day.** I stopped counting the number of my friends who hate their jobs. It's just plain sad and the older I get, the more you can see it in their eyes, their demeanor, their words. I have the opposite problem - I love coming to work, working with young people, sharing their passion and enthusiasm. I have always said that the day I no longer want to come to work, that's the day I need to start leaving. I am doing no one any good if I don't have the passion, particularly working with fraternities and sororities. They can smell 'fake' a mile away.
- 2. Don't let your colleagues/boss dictate your passion.** If they aren't a member of a fraternity or sorority, you can't hold it against them that they just don't understand why you have the passion that you do. Just hold true to your convictions that when done right, there is no better learning laboratory than the fraternity/sorority experience. It's your job to help educate your colleagues as well as your students. If your boss is a member, then they should understand!
- 3. You are not superhuman - admit you aren't and you will be better off.** Sixty/seventy hour work weeks are not going to make you a better advisor. They are going to make you a tired advisor and advisor who is not necessarily at their best. (Okay, fraternity and sorority recruitment aside and the occasional risk management situation, where you just don't have any choice, there are no other reasons I can think of to stay in the office all of those hours week after week.) If you are thinking about work on the treadmill, at the movies, with your significant other, or in your dreams, you are working too much! Slow down and enjoy. Trust me, it won't fall apart.
- 4. Make sure your boss knows everything, don't let them get surprised because you 'forgot' to tell them something. Too much information is better than none.** I make it a point to carbon-copy every response that has any possibility of controversy to my supervisor. What the boss does with that email is their own business. I never want my supervisor to go into meetings and be asked "did you know about this?" and them not know. CYA is alive and well in the 21st century.

- 5. Find one person on campus you can be “real” with, preferably someone NOT involved in what you do day to day.** So, my ‘go to guy’ is our Director of Campus Recreation. Yes, he works with the fraternity and sorority community in intramurals, but the reality is, he doesn’t know a lot about what it is like to advise them. You need to find someone on campus or close by you can have coffee with, a meal with, or just seek out when you need to question or vent. They will do the same back. Trust me on this – it is a very efficient symbiotic relationship.
- 6. Find one person in the field you can be “real” with, preferably someone who IS involved and knows what you do day to day.** The opposite can also be true. Having someone who, like you, is trying to get a fraternity and sorority community to ‘get it’, can also be valuable. This person does not necessarily have to be on campus or in your headquarters. I utilized AFA for this purpose and developed a cohort of friends all over the country who I knew would be on the other end of the phone, no matter what the issue was. When you are in the weeds, an outside perspective is a valuable one.
- 7. Learn to appreciate the subtle art of persuasion.** I am the first to admit that I didn’t always make the right decisions in college. Well, college students are not that different than when I went to school in the dark ages. What experience has brought me is the ability to help them see their decisions in a different way and to allow them to figure out how to fix the problem, no matter how complex, without me actually saying how to do it. This comes with practice, and unfortunately, because of poor decision-making. But when mastered, this is an awesome tool for the toolkit.
- 8. Understand that students hear what they want to hear - ask them to repeat what you said so there is no misinterpretation. Be careful with your words and if you can, document, document, document.** No matter how clear you think you are being with students, the best way to make sure they heard you is to ask them to repeat or summarize your conversation. That way, you can be assured that they heard you...you know they heard you, and by following up that conversation via email, they can never come back at you and say “that’s not what we agreed to.”
- 9. Create a feel good file.** As a young professional, I got some great advice from my first supervisor. She told me to create a feel good file – in my case, an accordion file to place notes, cards, emails, (okay – we didn’t have email back then, but you get the picture). And whenever I was questioning if I was making a difference, I pulled that file out and read some of those messages that students who are thankful for your help, give you. Students live in their own world so we are rarely thanked. But, every once in a while we are, and those are the ones to keep and treasure. It helps during the difficult times.
- 10. Don’t forget from whence you came.** For many of us, our undergraduate experience in a fraternity or sorority was the defining experience. Don’t forget what it was like, no matter how old you get, to get your first set of letters, your first Greek Week, your first date party or what it was like to go through your ritual. That is where they are coming from.

Lessons Learned: Jennifer Jones-Hall

1. **Collaboration** - You will never move forward or get very far in anything you do if you don't collaborate. Always be on the look for programs, a colleague, etc. to collaborate with. Your number one skill set that will develop from collaboration is teamwork!
2. **Learn the culture** of where you are and adopt that mindset as soon as possible. Each organization and institution you join will appreciate new ideas and new ways of doing things, once you are immersed in the culture.
3. **Student involvement** is critical in everything you do. Work with the students on setting standards and expectations. Students rise to expectations that they create. They truly are the solution.
4. **Get over yourself!** I have learned that students don't sit around on a Friday night conspiring against me. We need to remember that students who come to college are still young adults (adolescent stage) learning right from wrong. They will make mistakes, but they can and will learn from those mistakes.
5. If you don't already know and live the **mission of your institution** or your organization, start the memorization now. It will be important for you and your office to mirror and reflect the values of the organization/institution on a daily basis. It should be the basis of all your decisions.
6. **Stop/Start/Continue.** Take time at the end of each semester/term and evaluate with your staff and your students on whether there is something you can stop, something you can start and a program and or event you should continue. Often we get on a treadmill of doing the same things over and over. Take time to evaluate why you are doing what you do.
7. **University fit is important.** Sometimes the most important decision is not to leave, but to stay. While this was true for me for 15 years at Valparaiso University, you also need to decide when you need to be challenged at a different level. If you are ready for that challenge and can find the right fit, by all means, make the jump.
8. **Read.** Never stop reading, educating yourself, attending conferences and asking questions. Pick up one new higher education and/or leadership book a month!
9. **Take time off.** I don't mean, take time off when students are on break. Take time off when the students are in session. I find that students and/or your staff can live without you.
10. **Find a balance in your life.** I always take a lunch hour off campus, I leave at 5:00 p.m. and I manage my calendar. I am a better professional because I have taught the students what family and balance mean. I work smarter, not harder. If you don't have a pet and or kids, get one or two, etc. I am a better professional because of Scooter, Carolina, and Maddie (all animals).

Things to Think About:

1. **Exceed expectations.** Know what is expected of you. Exceed those expectations.
2. **Be appreciative.** Successful people tend to be grateful people. Appreciate the fact that you have a job. Appreciate all developmental opportunities given to you, if that is going to a conference, being asked to serve on a committee, etc. Appreciate the efforts of your co-workers and let them know often and appreciate the students with whom you work and show them often.
3. **Contribute to others' success.** Make sure that credit is given to others whenever possible.
4. **Your ability to get another job** will be directly related to how well you do on the job you have now. This also applies to volunteering within the Association. This is a very small field when you think about it, and everyone is friends with everyone else. Many times I will do informal, behind the scenes references.
5. Do what you **love**, only do it better.
6. We are here to **serve and influence**. Realize that in some way you influence everyone you come in contact with.
7. **Focus on your purpose, not your payoff.** Somewhere in our experience, either someone or something motivated us to give back to students. Give them your best at all times.
8. **Keep your commitments**, but also learn to say "no."
9. Be **truthful** in everything you do. In order to be persuasive, we must be believable; to be believable we must be credible; to be credibly, we must be truthful.
10. Put on **different hats** to serve the broader organization when possible.

"Success is the sum of small efforts, repeated day in and day out." Robert Collier

Conclusion

Listen, advising fraternities and sorority can sometimes be a thankless, overwhelming, sweaty, there is no way I can get this all done and maintain my sanity, mess. And the fact that most fraternity and sorority professionals are perfectionists (that's okay...you might as well admit it, you'll feel better) makes it even more difficult. But, you cannot lose sight of yourself in all of this. Understand that we realize that there will be times you will have to work longer hours. We get that. But not to your detriment – if you go down, who will pick up the pieces for you? Many of us are islands on our own campuses or in our headquarters – trust me, no one else understands nor in my experience, do they want to. Alumni and university boards have demands, your supervisors have demands, and students have demands. That's a lot of demanding and still, there is only one of you. You need to take care of you and if it is a choice between attending an optional 10:00 p.m. meeting, or going home and discovering or re-discovering a passion, then trust us in our collective fifty years of professional experience – *go home!*