

## Lifelong Learning

Jeremiah Shinn, Ph.D., Boise State University

From *The Strategic Guide to Shaping Your Student Affairs Career*. Reprinted with permission from the author.

I will be the first to admit that *lifelong learning* was not a concept I believed was applicable to me during my first couple of years as a student affairs professional. I had graduated magna cum laude with a degree in biology while being one of the most visible and involved undergraduate students on campus, a combination I believed to be quite an achievement at the time. Following graduation, I crammed three changes of clothes, a toothbrush, and a journal into my backpack; hopped on a plane; and spent the next 2 months sleeping in hostels, trains, and on beaches in Europe and northern Africa. After growing up in a rural state, I was finally learning something about the world. Upon my triumphant return stateside, I moved into a housing co-op where I dutifully shared cooking and cleaning duties with 35 individuals who I would have never met were it not for our shared love of cheap rent. I jumped through the requisite hoops prescribed by my graduate program of study and ultimately earned a master's degree from a "top 3" higher education program (nobody told me the arbitrary and irrelevant nature of rankings) before ultimately landing a great student affairs job on my first try, well before graduation. To that point, I had done everything expected of me, and I believed I was well on my way to becoming an overwhelming success in my chosen profession.

As I began my career, I was interested in making big decisions, dispensing advice, being important, and spending the minimum amount of time necessary at the entry level, but I certainly was not concerned with learning. Sure, I would pursue a doctorate someday, but only because I needed that stamp on my passport to validate my unique brand of student affairs brilliance. In my mind, I was a prodigy. I had already studied higher education through the lenses of history, philosophy, public policy, law, and org theory, so I was doubtful that further classes would make me any smarter than I was already. At this point, I believed I was knowledgeable enough to excel at my boss's job. Surely the only thing holding me back was the fact that I worked in a shortsighted profession that placed undue emphasis on *years of experience*. "Just give me the checklist, the catalog of buzzwords and let me get older...and I'll be fine." This was my thought process as a young professional. I was wrong.

There is an exhausting amount of "Chapter 4" narrative (if that reference is lost on you, it won't be if you decide to pursue a doctorate) that fits here, but what's more important is what my journey from knowing everything to knowing nothing in 13 short years has taught me.

1. *Learning* as a professional is not about having a checklist and it isn't always as simple as participating in a program, reading an article, facilitating a workshop, or attending a conference. It is not about what everyone else is doing, what someone has done, or what anyone thinks I should do. It's about *me*. This is my journey, and I get to chart my own path in the manner that best suits the kind of

professional I am trying to become. For example, I read more business and finance literature than student affairs literature. Student affairs literature is not making me better right now. The other stuff is. For me, it's not about the content but about the framework. That is what I need to grow. Sure, I devote effort each week toward remaining current with regard to student affairs literature and thought, but it is not what makes me more effective.

2. Learning can only occur to the extent that I'm willing to challenge my own assumptions related to what I do and how I do it. Adlai Stevenson once said: "If we value the pursuit of knowledge, we must be free to follow wherever that search may lead us." Buying into this philosophy ensures that I am going to be wrong more often than I would like. I take pleasure in being right, but the more often I am wrong, the closer I am to ultimately being right. It is a marathon...not a sprint. I do not have it all figured out. It wasn't until I owned up to that, that I was able to pursue what I really needed to be learning to advance our profession at the pace our world requires.
3. Learning is about always moving my thinking forward as an individual and as a professional. It is about refusing to get stuck in unproductive cultures or antiquated processes (and student affairs has plenty of both). Constantly moving forward requires me to *do* different. *Doing* different requires me to *be* different. *Being* different demands that I *think* differently. *Thinking* differently obliges me to *learn* more. And *learning* more demands that I am willing to ask incisive questions and to challenge my most foundational beliefs and long-standing practices and those of my chosen profession. This is why I read things outside of student affairs. I believe that irreverence is what facilitates progress. I do not find our literature to be irreverent, so it does not move me to think beyond where we are now. I want to do different; therefore, I need to learn something different.
4. Learning has been the by-product of experience. Experience matters. It has taught me more than all other things combined. While it would be possible for me to accumulate 13 years of experience only to still be bad at my job, I now know that without experience I would definitely be bad at my job. I was incapable of leading a department when I finished graduate school. Actually, I was incapable of leading a department until about 6 months before I was responsible for leading one! Experience matters, and it is not just about *sitting in the chair* or *doing my time* but also about understanding the overwhelming nuance associated with leading, supervising, making decisions, and inspiring progress. The best professional development experiences I have had are my jobs. Nothing prepared me to be where I am more than where I have been. Experience matters.

I often find myself wanting to go back in time and talk some sense into the arrogant, green, 23-year-old version of myself. He was intelligent and had the potential to do great work, but he didn't know what he didn't know and was not yet willing to learn. I am thankful that he had some great mentors who were able to gently shatter his perceptions and introduce him to a world of ideas and alternate ways of thinking. He knows now that

he will never be finished learning. Times change, and what was relevant yesterday is antiquated tomorrow. The process starts again each year. Such is the nature of life – and learning.