

Fear: The Truth and The Struggle

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Your heart sinks to your stomach. You begin to feel a chill and a tight knot in your stomach where your heart has landed. You begin questioning this feeling, and seeking a diagnosis, inevitably leading to overwhelming anxiety. With introspection you realize and begin to understand that you are experiencing fear – a feeling many student affairs professionals experience throughout their career.

When we discuss fear, there is a certain level of transparency required. I am opening myself up to that level of transparency in the hope some of you will identify with my journey as a new fraternity and sorority advisor.

As a first-year graduate student at Indiana University Bloomington, I received an assistantship in fraternity and sorority life (FSL) at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI). I had no clue what I was getting myself into, but I was excited for the journey. That excitement began to fade once I started to experience some of the more complicated issues we deal with in this field. Hearing about lawsuits, hazing incidents, and judicial hearings caused me to feel anxiety and produced fear of the work required in this field. Building friendships with graduate students working in different functional areas provided an outlet from the anxiety, and ultimately, I pursued professional positions outside of FSL.

I kept my toe in the water by presenting at the Association of Fraternal Leadership and Values (AFLV) Central Conference and facilitating fraternity and sorority retreats at various institutions. While I enjoyed these opportunities to facilitate and present on topics associated with fraternities and sororities, I began to feel incomplete in my professional role. After serving in two positions at two different institutions in different parts of the country over two years, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was missing. I was having a difficult time connecting to the roles, and after months of introspective reflection and conversation with trusted colleagues, I realized my passion and purpose still stemmed from a desire to work with students affiliated with fraternal organizations. I noticed I was feeling disconnected and incomplete because I was not honoring my passion. At that point, I decided to put my fears aside and sought mentorship and guidance from other professionals to support my reentry to the field – a successful endeavor that landed me my current role as a director of a fraternity/sorority community.

Even in a new role, I found myself, again, with sweaty palms and a stomach in knots at the thought of managing an entire community after just one year of direct experience as a graduate assistant. Ultimately, I realized my fears were stemming from doubt – doubting myself, my education, my passion, and my skills. To counter the doubt and fear, I decided to focus on my faith, purpose, and passion. This choice has helped me to learn more about myself, personally and professionally.

Fear has many different functions in our lives. We can let the fear overcome and control us, or we can confront it. If we give in to fear, we risk living an inauthentic life misaligned from our true purpose. If we allow our faith, purpose, and passion to be the driving force in our lives, fear will not be able to control our actions and thoughts. I acknowledge this is not easy, and fear can be deeply engrained in us. It can rule our lives if we don't have the proper tools to deal with it. Sometimes those tools are support and mentoring. Other times, it may be professional counseling.

It is important to acknowledge fear affects all of us differently, and it doesn't ever completely leave us. I still experience it as a new professional, and I expect to feel it at different levels and times throughout my career. Experiencing fear causes us to learn how to deal with it. I choose to take a stand against fear and not let it control my life, both personally and professionally. What will you choose to do?