

And Then, We Say Good-bye: Reflections on Transitioning and Moving On

Zachary E. Shirley, EdD | University of Cincinnati | @DrZacharyEvan

In student affairs, especially in fraternity/sorority life, we know the word “transition” all too well. Officers transition in and out of their roles. Students transition in and out of institutions. Professionals transition from both roles and institutions.

For the spirit of this article, “transition” speaks to moving from a role somewhere comfortably familiar, somewhere that has been home, to a role on a new campus, with a new population, in a place that is foreign and completely new. A transition like this might take you somewhere miles and hours away from the life you have always known.

At the time of penning this article, I was entering my last week as the inaugural Director for Fraternity & Sorority Life at Texas A&M University-Commerce. I am a Texas boy through and through, spending 35 of my 36 years in Dallas. I grew up here, went to college (and joined my fraternity) here, received my master’s degree from A&M-Commerce, and completed my doctoral studies just one hour away. I worked at institutions within an hour radius of one another, and built a foundation in Dallas. My family, friends, and, arguably most important, my identical twin brother (who also got bit by the student affairs bug), were all here. My life was rooted in Dallas, and it was the place I thought I would stay for the rest of my days. Then the University of Cincinnati posted a position that grabbed my attention, giving one lucky individual an opportunity to serve as the inaugural Director for their fraternity/sorority community.

Fast forward past the “American Gladiator” obstacle course that is the interview process in student affairs, and here I am, sitting amongst packed boxes and photos wrapped in newspaper. Here I am preparing to transition from Dallas, TX – home of triple digit heat, bugs the size of your hand, and Homecoming Mums – to Cincinnati, OH, where it will definitely be colder, and a shock to my Texan upbringing. This wasn’t a transition I ever thought I would experience, yet one that many in student affairs face often, and something we should talk about more.

If you were to tell me a year ago I would be leaving the Great Nation of Texas (as most Texans believe), I would have probably laughed in your face. I enjoyed my role at A&M-Commerce, adored my students, appreciated and felt appreciated by my colleagues and supervisor, and had it pretty good at my university. I was in a groove. Aside from minor surprises and hurdles here and there, I had it made. Entering my sixth year at A&M-Commerce, I started to feel something, hinting there was more out there for me. I felt there was something bigger, something that would stretch and expand my comfort zone. That feeling opened the door for this transition to the University of Cincinnati, and as I prepare for this move I am both extremely terrified and utterly excited.

Oddly enough, I am finding that feeling terrified is one the best parts of this journey, as it is also laced with enthusiasm, eagerness, and anticipation for what this transition will bring to me, and what I will bring to this new institution and its fraternity/sorority community.

As I reflect on my experience approaching this transition, I have learned some things I would like to share that will, hopefully, help someone else in their transition, or when thinking of making a transition:

1. Never be afraid to put yourself out there – be confident in what you bring and the skills you possess. Oftentimes, we are afraid of the possibility of transition because we are afraid of the “what if” lying around the corner. Block that out. Believe in YOU.
2. Transition can be frightening, yes. However, it can also mean the opportunity to push yourself to, and even beyond, limits you did not know you had, or that have been holding you back.
3. Sometimes, moving on with our lives and growing personally and professionally means moving away from home. Know that home will always be home.
4. You may be scared. You may second-guess yourself. You probably will wonder if this is the right thing for you to do. Have faith in yourself; after all, they picked YOU for a reason!
5. I oftentimes tell my students, “One day, either you will leave me, or I will leave you. Most of the time, you leave me. However, the day may very well come when it is my time to leave before you do.” It is okay for us to leave, too. Grant yourself that permission.

Transition can bring out a better version of yourself, one who lies dormant within you, hidden behind your comfort zone. Never let the fear of the transition supersede an opportunity for you to make a difference in the lives of students who deserve your positive influence. Life is all about transition, so embrace opportunities for change as opportunities for growth.