

Staying Put

Kahlin McKeown | University of Maryland | @kahlinmck

For the past four years, I have listened to the same morning show almost every day. The host of this morning show, Bobby Bones, is an energetic, self-deprecating man who believes very strongly in a few things – the power of positivity, a well-timed joke, and if you work hard at something, good things will come to you. Part of what makes his show different is Bobby didn't recruit "radio people" to work with him, but rather, just recruited his friends to join the show. Most of them left a higher salary, benefits, and the promise of a paycheck to take a chance on the radio show. Some of them even worked for free for a year before getting any paycheck at all.

For the past four years, I also have driven to the University of Maryland (UMD) every day to serve in my role as the Panhellenic Advisor there. I have had the same role for my entire career at UMD, minus a few shifted responsibilities here and there. During just my second year at UMD, I attended the AFA Annual Meeting and was asked numerous times by a variety of folks in the field when I was leaving my job at Maryland. I was taken aback by the number of people who asked me about my assumed job search. I had only been in my role for 16 months – in my mind, I was just getting the hang of the students, the institution, its norms, and my role, and I knew I had more work to do before I would consider leaving UMD.

One of the reasons I like listening to the Bobby Bones Show is because the people on it have fought hard to get where they are, and they are grateful for their recent success. Sometimes in fraternity/sorority life and, generally, in student affairs, people expect the success without the work that comes before it. I couldn't help thinking of our field when listening to the radio show. Most of the folks in fraternity/sorority life work long hours, get paid less than they think they should, and have no promise their role will continue to be funded for the foreseeable future amidst budget cuts. Our work is a daily grind – it is not easy, but it's worth it. If you grind it out and do good work, good things will come your way.

With four years in one job, the fact I am even in a position to write an article on the topic of longevity in a role is part of a larger issue. In the data released by the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors, the average time spent in one role was two years. If professionals are turning over that quickly on a regular basis, we are doing our students a disservice. By the time folks learn a role and get comfortable in it, they are already transitioning out. I don't think two years should be our *average* time spent in a role, but I do recognize some will need to move on after a short time. I think we should reconsider our message to graduate students and young professionals about longevity in a position and at an institution – our current 2-5 year norm isn't working.

I have been able to reflect on my decision to stay at Maryland and in an entry-level role quite a bit over the past year or so. Here are some things I have thought about when considering my

own career and when advising graduate students and younger professionals in their respective careers:

- There is no minimum or maximum number of years you “should” stay in a role. We seem to have normalized the 2-5 year range, but you can leave after one year or stay more than five if you feel it is in your best interest. I left my first job out of graduate school after a year for a better fit for me personally. Life happens – your career won’t be doomed if you break the norm.
- Don’t underestimate the power of putting in your time and doing hard work. Folks in this field get noticed when they do good work. So focus on your current position, put your head down, and get to work. You’ll advance eventually, but don’t think it’ll happen after year one or two in an entry level role.
- Adjust expectations about title and how long it will take to get where you want to be. I came into this field without much expectation or concept of what my end goal was – I still am not quite sure where I want to end up career-wise. If you are dreaming of being a dean of students, director of a department or office, or vice president, it will most likely take you a while to get there, with a lot of hard work along the way. Title is just that – a title. Don’t put too much weight in it. Also, take your time – don’t rush to get to the top of the chain.
- There are lots of benefits to staying in one role or at one institution for a while. The ability to build trust and great relationships around you is at the top of my list. When you start to build trust with your supervisor and other staff in your department or office, great things come your way. More exciting or progressive responsibility, a seat at the table to make decisions, and potentially, a promotion, are all benefits of staying put for a bit. In my role at Maryland, I have been given many opportunities because of my time spent here. I have had the opportunity to teach leadership classes for fraternity/sorority students and I have chaired three of four internal committees within our department, each of which gave me a new set of skills and armed me with new knowledge. Navigating a new place is difficult – I am able to do my job more effectively and efficiently with the context I’ve gained. Additionally, the knowledge of people around campus and the ability to form relationships with those folks has been incredibly helpful for efficient work. Most job transitions require you to start over, and that takes a lot of time and energy that could otherwise be spent elsewhere.
- The grass is not always greener. There is a lot of talk about salary in student affairs and specifically, within fraternity and sorority life. I don’t think this is just our issue – many of my friends have jobs in other fields and have the same problems with low salaries, expected long work hours, and demand for high job productivity. I would be careful before deciding to jump ship if you’re expecting to find a higher salary when you do.

You should do what you believe is best for you. Personally, I think there are lots of benefits to staying in a role, and I have been able to experience some of them firsthand in a job I have loved doing for the past few years. But even more important is the ability to do good work and

to feel fulfilled in whatever you are doing. Our field has maintained a set of norms that can be restricting or counterproductive to our end goal of supporting our students and advocating for our organizations. I'd encourage you to examine those norms carefully before making career decisions, and to consider your goals and motivations through that process, as well.