

Timing is Everything

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You accept a new position wanting to add positive contributions to the community and leave it better than you found it. But how do you know when you've accomplished that and when it is time to transition out of your role? I've found the key is finding the turning point between investing in a community and holding the community back from creating positive change. There is no perfect number of years to stay in a position and there are many ways a professional can continue investing themselves in a particular role. Over the last three years, I have thought about what my next career move would look like, and the most important question I always went back to was, "am I, and is the community, ready to transition?" Last year, the timing had come, and I was making the move.

When I took my first job as a fraternity and sorority life (FSL) coordinator, it was not your average transition. I was an FSL graduate assistant in the middle of my first and second years of a student affairs graduate program when a new coordinator position opened in our office. I knew I had fewer years of professional experience than the other candidates, but knew I had to apply because the work I envisioned accomplishing was not going to be complete after two years of graduate school.

Our division had each department perform assessments using the guides provided by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) every five years. In my first year as a graduate assistant, it was time for the FSL CAS assessment. I spent all year working with the review teams to assess and build a strategic plan. I understood the direction the community was going, I had prior experience in many of the areas of development, and I was excited to do the work.

Over the first three years in my role as coordinator, the community was growing, the plan was showing progress, and new challenges each year kept me learning. I told myself I would stay until I felt there was nothing new to learn. That statement, while important to consider as professionals in higher education, is dangerous because you can always take on more responsibilities and keep learning. There were numerous university committees and national volunteer opportunities offering just as much back to me as the time I was giving to them. However, I had to remember for each project I took on outside of my role, I needed to bring back something I learned into my work with the fraternity and sorority community: I had to advocate for the fraternity and sorority community on the university committees; I needed to strengthen my facilitation skills so I could lead more productive programs; I needed to expand my knowledge beyond my campus so I could then share that knowledge with our community. This was working for a while, but I knew the time was going to come when I needed to transition.

In my fourth year as the coordinator, fifth on campus, I started to see a shift in my mind and body. The community had accomplished many of the objectives we identified in our strategic



plan. Changes at the university level created new challenges for our fraternity and sorority community. Discussions about fraternal housing, increased accountability for academic metrics, and creating a more traditional college experience on campus with focus on athletics and traditions each had its effect on the type of student who joined a fraternity or sorority. Over the next two years, we would see new classes of freshmen coming in with excitement to join a fraternity or sorority. These freshmen focused more on the social aspects of the college experience. With them, they brought more challenges that would take years to address and resolve.

Professionally, I was excited about these new challenges and the learning that would come from them. I knew my next career move would be to a larger campus with many of these same challenges. This was a good stepping stone. But, as I worked on the plans to prepare for these changes, I found myself not as motivated by the work this time. I kept an eye out for the perfect career move and my next transition. At the same time, I was making plans in my personal life to build a family. I had to consider a timeline that would make for a smooth transition in both the fraternity and sorority community, as well as in my personal life.

My first job application went out and I was excited for the opportunity. One of my strengths is to be Futuristic, and this was in full effect during the application phase. But, I did not advance in the search. My first professional rejection reminded me of the college application rejections I knew all too well. I questioned whether I made the right choices professionally in taking my first job in the way I did. But, I had faith. I applied the next year to a couple more openings and had some options. When presented with the opportunity to leave my role, I had to look at the community and my personal life and ask myself again, “are we ready for this transition?” It was *not* time. The community was coming to a turning point. Plans were in the making both for the community and for my family. This next year was going to be one of major choices, and I felt compelled to stay put.

The team around you and those from whom you seek guidance are of utmost importance. Over the next year, I would have frequent conversations with three people on *my* team – my supervisor, the vice president for student affairs (VPSA), and my home partner. We would discuss what the community needed from me, what I needed to reach my long-term career goals, and what my family needed from me. Each member of my team provided different view points and had a different stake in my choices.

The thought of staying at one university and investing in the community long term came up multiple times. I knew I could commit to the plans in motion. We were also gearing up for another CAS assessment where I would have the opportunity to lay out some strategic goals. I didn’t consider seriously leaving my position until some individuals I respect told me I could be selling myself short and could potentially hold the community back. I never wanted to be someone who became okay with the status quo. I like to challenge the process, and was not sure that was going to be something I would be able to do for the next ten years in the same role.

When I made the commitment to officially look into new opportunities, I had the support of my team and set out to search for the perfect fit. My VPSA helped me identify areas where I needed growth and areas where I excelled. Finding the job that would balance the two was going to be important for both my confidence and commitment. I found a few and applied, this time with more success. Eventually, I landed a new role that was the fit I was looking for. The timing was better for my family and the transition into the new role has been smooth. I am challenged with new problems, but have the experience to offer strategic direction, and am surrounded by professionals with experience to help me learn.

The timing was right, too, for my former institution. The challenges added to my role in the last two years helped me professionally. The work we did in the last six years on campus to provide more student-driven programs, paired with the university challenges, helped activate the students to take ownership over their community's direction. Following my departure, the coordinator position changed and the community handled the transition well.

What I've learned is you cannot place a set number of years on how long you will stay in a position. It is important to assess the needs of the community, what you offer them professionally, and how those balance with your personal needs. Having a strategic direction for the community can keep you focused on priorities. Seek feedback from your professional team on your progress and their vision for the community. Listen to your body and mind. Do not ignore what you need. Transitions are not easy – you need courage to take on the change. Do not let fear of the uncomfortable hold you or the fraternity and sorority community back.