

Back to School: Transitioning from National Headquarters to Graduate School

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Since the summer of 2011, I have been fortunate enough to graduate from Eastern Michigan University, spend a year working for Alpha Kappa Lambda as a traveling consultant, and start the College Student Affairs Leadership Master's program at Grand Valley State University. While this seems like a fairly natural progression for someone going into student affairs, not everything was easy. I was constantly faced with new challenges throughout my journey.

Part of what made being a consultant so appealing was the constant change I would experience. One of my goals in life is to simply experience as much as possible. Even with that goal, all the different campuses, chapters, alumni, advisors, food, and anything else you can think of were still overwhelming at times. Not to mention, for those who have served as a traveling consultant, you know there can be weeks, even months, where you go without seeing a familiar face, at least in person. I cannot imagine what I would have done without Facebook or Skype while traveling.

Going to graduate school had been in the back of my mind since I started working for my national headquarters. I knew if I enjoyed what I was doing on the road and wanted to pursue it as a career, I would need to return to school for my Master's degree. Despite that, choosing to go back to school was not an easy decision. This decision brought about many personal and professional changes. One of the first changes is obvious—going to a new institution. I was used to going to different schools all of the time as a consultant, so learning to navigate a new campus was not very difficult. The difficulty came when I was learning where I fit in the Fraternity and Sorority Life team, Office of Student Life, and Division of Student Services. There are several more moving parts a new graduate student needs to adjust to, especially coming from working for a national organization. The challenge here was changing perspectives from one chapter as a part of a national organization to viewing an entire fraternity and sorority community as a part of the university. This not only changes your perspective for the short term, but it also causes you to look more at the big picture of student affairs and the role fraternity and sorority life has on a college campus.

This perspective has changed how I look at my future as a professional. There will likely be a time when I am no longer working directly with fraternities and sororities, and graduate school provides a number of opportunities to explore different areas of student affairs. While my current graduate assistantship focuses on fraternity and sorority life, these changing perspectives have caused me to look at the future with a more holistic mindset. For some, fraternity/sorority life is their goal and where they want to stay for their career. However, what has changed for me is that I now look at fraternity/sorority life as the beginning of my career, not the end. I am learning how to utilize fraternity/sorority life to enhance my career trajectory.

Entering the classroom once again is interesting. For many of my colleagues and me, going to class is sometimes the last thing on our mind with everything else that we have to do. However, I recently read a quote that has changed the way that I work: "Learn the difference between what's urgent and what's important and what matters more in your life" (Mind Tools, n.d.). There are always tasks graduate students and full-time staff feel like they need to do. Yet, there will never be enough time in the day to accomplish everything we find important. As a graduate student, I would not be in my position if it were not for school and my studies, so that needs to remain the priority regardless of how many programs I am coordinating or meetings I am attending.

One great way to work through all of these transitions is by finding mentors to help guide you along the way. Fortunately, this field has a number of people who will happily serve as a mentor and take a personal interest in the individual futures of budding professionals. Not only that, but you learn that mentors can serve a number of different roles in your life. There are numerous people in this field who were encouraged to enter student affairs by their mentor, and I am no different in this regard. At times, this person can be viewed as “the mentor” and epitome of everything you hope to be. Since beginning graduate school, however, I have been able to add to my “board of directors” and identify a number of mentors who challenge me personally and professionally.

Everyone is going to experience and interpret these changes differently, and it is important to keep that in mind. Change is the only constant, as many people will tell you in this field. The fact that I am saying that based on only a couple years of experience should tell you something...

References

Mind Tools. (n.d.). *The urgent/important matrix: Using time effectively and not just efficiently*. Retrieved from http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_91.htm.