Mistakes happen in the workplace, especially when you are new. You may be new in your job, your functional area, or higher education. Regardless of how you got here, there will be times when you make mistakes, and that is okay. Below I will focus on three major lessons I learned in my five years of working in fraternity/sorority life. I have reflected on my errors, found ways of improving, and then implemented solutions into my actions and personal philosophy. This list provides a reflection of the areas I see as most critical for the development of new professionals.

Listening to Everyone but Yourself
When you start a new job, especially right out of graduate school, it is easy to listen to others. As a graduate student, you are taught to seek out those campus historians who can provide context. You ask professionals who have worked at the institution for several years about what has worked and what has not. When speaking to administrators, students, advisors, and community members, it is important to remember these opinions can be subjective. I remember listening to professionals share issues they experienced with the fraternity/sorority community, complaining about aspects of it but not fully understanding the community. Additionally, most students will be willing to share when you are new, but some will try to paint a picture of a community from only their perspective.

As a new professional, it is essential to find your own professional identity, making decisions based on observations, education, and previous experiences. Making change for the sake of making change is a dangerous gamble. For instance, you may choose to change a policy before fully understanding the culture of a community only to realize later, with more experience, that a new policy would be ineffective. Knowing and understanding what you are getting yourself into before making the change is critical. It will be important to build relationships with the people most affected by the change, so get to know them and get their input before making the change.

Sometimes challenges occur within departments because there are people who have worked within those communities for long periods of time. Some employees might have experienced organizations that wronged them in the past. That is where you should take it upon yourself to learn and develop your own opinions. As someone who is new to the community, listen to what they have to say, ask what they would like to see, and incorporate that into your observations and conversations moving forward. Above all, you were the individual that was hired into the position where you will be asked to make changes and address issues that occur. I have heard “we hire experts” in many interviews and this is your opportunity to be the expert. Ultimately,
you are the one with the toolbox of knowledge and experiences to make those changes; do not sell your experiences short.

**Win the Day, Lose the Year**

When starting out as a new professional, it is easy to not be strategic. You are flooded with day-to-day tasks, meeting new people, getting used to the new environment, and trying to learn everything you can in a short amount of time. The daily grind can wear down your ability to think long-term, especially if you are constantly putting out fires. It is easy to think short-term and not consider how the daily decision-making could influence events or incidents that occur a week or a month from now. If you are creating policy, ask why that policy is being created and understand what unintended consequences may occur. Those unintended consequences may outweigh the original issue. Additionally, wide-spread behavior change never is because of policy implementation. Lots of time and energy is invested in creating policy with many different stakeholders, which can ultimately lead to few accomplishments. However, decisions made by too few people in a closed room often do not reflect well on the many. Community-wide policy needs to have support from the community, or at least be reasonable to those who will have to follow it. Understanding the importance of building coalitions will ensure the grand ideas you have as a new professional don’t flop as soon as they are rolled out. Consider making small adjustments bit by bit, and those changes will slowly build towards meaningful change.

When I started in my first job, my first response to anything was to react and create or build something that would address the issue. In hindsight, I probably should have taken some time to understand why the issue or behavior was occurring. It will be important to understand how the system works, why the framework is in place, and then to offer those recommendations based on industry best practices.

**Advocate for Yourself**

The final recommendation I make is find ways to advocate for yourself. This might seem like an obvious thing to do; however, it can take some new professionals longer to find their voice. Our jobs can be challenging. Working in higher education has its celebrations and struggles. As new professionals, it will be important for you to learn where your boundaries are. These could include a variety of things like how much interaction you have with students after hours or how you would like to receive feedback.

When I began my career, I felt I needed to show people how much I was willing to work. I would stay late, go to every campus event, and neglect myself all in the name of how hard I worked. I never took the allotted vacation time I had because the fear of what might happen if I was not
around. All of this led me to have a difficult time and eventually led me to making some changes in my life. The hardest part was building up the courage to tell people “no.” It is not healthy to overextend yourself. In order to be the best at your job, you need to be able to do your job. Because you are new, you may be asked or “voluntold” to serve on a number of committees, town and gown projects, or other opportunities that land on your desk. Remember why you were hired and what your professional priorities are. Your personal well-being is just as important as your ability to meet deadlines.

Your ability to do your job effectively will also reflect on how you view your job or your employer. If there is an issue in the workplace or if you feel you are being spread too thin, do not keep that to yourself. Be prepared to speak for yourself and find your voice. We talk all the time about how we advocate for students and the fraternal experience, but when it comes time to advocate for ourselves, we sometimes lose that voice. It may take some time to develop your voice, but make sure you are practicing and reflecting on your needs to be successful as a new professional.

Growing pains happen in any job. Those growing pains are ways in which you learn and grow as a professional. I am not an expert, to say the least, but simply someone who has made mistakes, learned from them, and is better because of them. It is the responsibility of seasoned professionals to share the lessons we have learned the hard way with those who come after us. Above all, wherever you go in your professional journey, enjoy what you do and work hard at it. Working with students can be tremendously rewarding, but only if you have the capacity to appreciate your experiences and grow from them.

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