

Introduction to Student Affairs Synthesis Paper

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Throughout this semester, I've learned the most through our class discussions and talking with my peers about our experiences, difficulties, and successes. Our discussions always were, or at least seemed, open and honest about issues we were facing, and knowing there are others who are experiencing similar situations at other campuses is reassuring. I've been able to grow a lot through class discussions as well. As an undergraduate student, I preferred to listen to other people's comments and contributions to the class. I knew entering graduate school I would have to be more vocal, and this is one of the areas I have seen a lot of growth in myself. I still have some work to do in regards to large group discussions, and I know I will only get better and more comfortable with it the more I do it.

I have also learned a lot about myself this semester and in the summer leading up to it; very cliché, I know. I learned I am strong enough to walk away from a full time job to pursue something I am passionate about and enjoy learning about. I know I was not ready to take that step away a year ago, but with the support system my family provided, I knew I was ready to take the plunge, quit my job, and go back to school. Through taking this step, I've become more confident with myself, and I have a better understanding of my beliefs and values due to conversations with classmates, residents, and supervisors.

I still believe I want to work with collegiate students. I have had an outstanding experience with the hall council I advise. There are on average ten to fifteen women who participate in hall council on a regular basis, and I'm continuing to develop relationships with each of them. The hall council has also experienced great success in programming for the building with large turnouts for events and positive feedback from other residents. I had the opportunity to advise an area council for two years as an undergrad, and never had success with any programming, or even getting a significant number of residents to attend the meetings.

I also believe I still want to work with Greek Life. Working with fraternity and sorority leaders to develop their leadership and communication skills is what I'd like to see myself doing in the future. I know I will most likely have to work in another functional area before I find a position at an institution I will be compatible with, and I'm more than willing to gain experiences in other functional areas along my journey. I also believe a small school is where I will thrive, as I like and prefer to give personal attention to students. That being said, I still do not have extensive experience with large institutions, and I am working on gaining some experience at one in the near future.

I've been challenged in many ways working at St. Thomas. The biggest challenge I still struggle with are the rules, especially the unwritten ones, set forth by the school and church. I believe we are doing a big disservice to our students by not having open discussions about sex and sexual identity, among other things. I believe this desire for openness stems from my experience as an undergraduate, and the openness on our campus. I believe being able to have these conversations with our students educates them in ways classroom teaching cannot. Because of this, I don't believe I will seek full time employment at an institution whose values are deeply rooted in the Catholic teaching.

The course readings really brought what we were learning and what I was doing in my assistantship to life. The early chapters of *Beginning Your Journey* since I had worked outside of higher education for two years and was getting back into the field. I feel as though the readings; especially chapters one and two really impacted me. Chapter one really reminded me of why and how I got into the profession and reminded me of my undergraduate experiences. This chapter also reminded me about the importance of passing on my passion for student affairs to those students with whom I work, and acting as a mentor to those who become interested in the profession. Chapter two reminded me of sitting in one of our training meetings we had at the beginning of our assistantships, where we learned all of the unwritten rules we were supposed to follow and the politics we would encounter.

Contested Issues in Student Affairs also assisted in engaging me in the class work. Two of my three reading reviews were from this text, and I feel doing the reading reviews really helped my understanding of the chapter since I would have to summarize it for the review. I also appreciated the lay out of the chapters, and the content and questions the various authors chose. Quaye's (2011) chapter on language was the first chapter to make me think about how people use language, and what is implied by the words they choose to use. After reading this chapter, I had a meeting with the sorority I advise. I asked the chair of our advisory board to challenge the sisters to use 'sister, woman, or potential new member (PNM) in their every day conversations and reports. Having posed this challenge to the chapter several months ago, I have seen great improvement in the chapter's reports, all of which I proof read before they are sent to nationals. I was very proud of the last report I read, there was only one instance of the word 'girl' used.

Professional development is something I enjoy doing and I believe every institution should require for their staff members. Going to professional development opportunities not only allows us to gain knowledge and be able to discuss current trends, issues, or programming on our campuses, but also allows for networking between institutions. Networking is very important for student affairs educators who are looking to advance in the field, or simply to make new connections. For me, networking also helps me break out of my shell, but takes a lot of effort and determination on my part to be able to walk up to someone and introduce myself. This is a skill I am continually working on.

Currently, I'm trying to find connections in a Greek Life department to gain some experience. I am lucky enough to have supervisors and mentors who are willing to help me connect with several of the larger schools in the area to see if there are opportunities for me to become involved and gain experiences on other campuses. I hope to be able to do this either next semester, or starting next summer. At the very least, I plan on conducting informational

interviews with different universities so I will have a better understanding of the way a Greek Life office operates, especially at a large institution.

Additionally, I am trying to attend a couple national conferences. I am applying to be the New C2 Intern at ACPA this spring, which would provide me with an excellent opportunity to network not only with the New C3 Support Team, but also with professionals for areas of the country I would otherwise not have the opportunity to meet. I would also like to attend the AFA national conference next year. Through participating in national conferences, as well as continuing to attend professional development opportunities on the local level, I hope to gain more skills and confidence to assist me in the next stage of my career; searching for a full time position.

Growth, change, and personal and professional development are all catalysts to changing how I will approach the profession not only now as I enter it, but continually throughout my career. I was very naïve when I decided to quite my other job and return to graduate school. I did very little research on St. Thomas out side of learning about the structure of the Residence Life department and learning the mission and convictions of the school. While I do not regret leaving my old job, I know now I must do a better job researching institutions I apply for jobs at so I have a better understanding of their values before I interview or accept a job at a place where I would not be happy for an extended period of time.

When I begin my next job search, I must remember the guidelines in *Don't Drink the Water*. I think the three most important guidelines I'll need to remember are "Identify your own cultural baggage...Learning the language... [and] Ask for directions" (Whitt, 1997). I find letting go of my cultural baggage to be very difficult. Having loved my undergraduate experience, I find myself wanting to experience similar things here at St. Thomas, and am often disappointed or frustrated when the experiences are not. I am slowing getting better at not comparing everything to my previous experiences, because I know I must have new experiences to advance in the profession. Learning the language is also very important both at an institutional level, and on a local and national level. Language, especially abbreviations and acronyms, vary between institutions. Asking for directions, the third guideline I identified, can help with learning the different acronyms and terms used at an institution. In my opinion, it is better to ask for clarification early in your employment, than to pretend you know an acronym or terminology, and find yourself having to figure it out on your own later.

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