

The Case for Conferences: Confessions of a New Professional

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I am not a fan of traveling. Recently I concluded 12 days and 6,806 miles of conference travel. For reference, this was Nashville to Salt Lake to Nashville to St. Louis to Jacksonville (via Dallas) back to Nashville (via Chicago). It was good to be home.

On the final leg of the journey—Jacksonville to Nashville via Chicago—the weather was cold and rainy, requisite of a typical Florida conference in November. The small jet was packed with people leaving the tranquility of four consecutive gray, wet days. While waiting in the airport, I devoured *Outside Magazine*, *SkyMall*, and *Sports Illustrated* in an attempt to avoid the countless PowerPoint handouts, publications, session notes, and the only book I brought on the trip. These things require thought. I didn't want to think. My brain was packed with information on transfer student issues, sophomore programs, knowledge communities, student affairs scholarship, work/life balance, and how to publish. After multiple receptions, presentations, keynote speakers, and poster sessions, I couldn't take it anymore. I was done.

The pilot warned us that the trip might be a little unsettling. There was inclement weather throughout the Midwest. We rose through the gray, misty clouds with endless layers of murkiness. We climbed for 40 minutes, my window seat rendered useless due to the all-encompassing clouds. My book and handouts beckoned me to deeper thought, but I resisted. Retreating back to *SkyMall* magazine, I regressed to glancing through the pages of inspirational picture frames and sci-fi memorabilia.

Suddenly, an epiphanic moment of relief came. The plane rose above the clouds, and from my window seat I could see an endless sea of perfect clouds through bright, blinding sunshine. Cloud mountains jutted from the sea of marshmallows rolling across the sky.

In this moment everything above the clouds seemed perfect. The storms below, the turbulent ride, and the need to get back to deeper meaning all became an afterthought. I paused to bask in the beauty of it all.

My plane trip provides an apt analogy for the life of a new professional in student affairs. In the beginning, proving worth, intelligence, and value are uppermost. We stay late, check e-mail on the weekends, take student calls on our personal cell phones, and live in the “we have no balance or boundaries” world that we will leave behind in a couple years. Naïveté, innovation, and enthusiasm are characteristic of the entry-level position. This energy is often used for late-night programs, weekend events, or moving

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tables and chairs. It can also be used for breathing new life and enthusiasm into programs that shape the lives of students. In any battle, it is the front line which needs the motivation and vision to continue to move forward.

Let's not misunderstand; it's not all bad. It's not even significantly bad. But many of us, myself included, entered this world believing it would be perfect. A great collegiate experience or a dedicated professional inspired us to get a master's degree and venture into higher education. Then these two distinct worlds—the world that inspired us and the world that is reality—collide. Only the broken pieces are left to put back together. Red tape and politics and personal agendas taint the lofty aspirations of development theory, student learning, and the possibility of a seamless academic and cocurricular experience.

It is in this place of confusion that a conference experience can be a moment in the clouds. We can begin to drift upwards towards a utopian sea where moments of how it could be (*what-ifs; I wish, we could*s) fill the conversations of aspiring educators. Young professionals want these respites of hope. Actually, it goes beyond want; it's a need. We need to play in the clouds and dream of programs and challenge and a perfect educational system, if only for a fleeting moment. In this place we are renewed and remember the time when we first realized that this is our life's work.

My college mentor once told me, after a lengthy career in student affairs, that if asked to be truthful about the lives he had changed, it would only be a handful. He responded that there may be 10 to 12 students, with a couple dozen on the fringes of influence. He asked me if I thought it was worth it. In the excitement of applying for graduate school and first jobs and new ideas, of course it was worth it. But a few short years later the adrenaline begins to fade, and we are left asking ourselves if it is, in fact, worth it. C.S. Lewis (1960) said:

The proper aim of giving is to put the recipient in a state where he no longer needs our gift. We feed children in order that they may soon be able to feed themselves; we teach them in order that they may soon not need our teaching. Thus a heavy task is laid upon this Gift-love. It must work towards its own abdication. We must aim at making ourselves superfluous. The hour when we can say "They need me no longer" should be our reward. (p. 62-63)

Now that we know, can we see through it and work this way?

Conferences remind us why we entered into this life of listening, dreaming, and collaborating for the student and the student experience. We can recapture the soul of what we do and why we continue. Kathleen Manning (2001) describes this experience as being when "student affairs professionals are exposed to the soul's creative polarity. As such, they can be this *and* that, compassionate *and* cruel, negative *and* positive, soft *and* hard" (p. 31). The experience of stepping away to engage in genuine reflection provides opportunities to live in the polarity of what we do. Hopefully, the soul is renewed, the mind is re-centered, and we are reminded why we chose this in the first place.

Beyond the renewal, there are intrinsic benefits as well. Presentations, case studies, award nominations, and networking are all aspects of the conference experience that help focus attention on the opportunities for improvement and successes of campus life.

Critical analysis of personal and professional experiences is essential to the growth of new professionals. This education, beyond the professional experience, is shaping the next generation of professionals.

Henri Nouwen (2004) said, “It is in this solitude that we realize that being is more important than having and that we are worth more than the sum of our efforts” (p. 26). The case for conferences is centered on a foundation in which we realize that being present, renewed, and energized for our students is the most important program on campus. It is further grounded in the realization that our worth is not measured by our résumés, program attendance, or even staying on budget. It is measured by our desire to learn, improve, and become more for the sake of students.

My encouragement to you—directors, deans, and vice presidents—is to let us play for a moment. Young professionals need to dream of big things and hope for better things. We are the future of higher education and our education is in your hands.

References

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