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## CREATING A STUDENT AFFAIRS CAREER STRATEGY

*Strategy:*

- a careful plan or method: a clever stratagem
- the art of devising or employing plans or stratagems toward a goal
- an adaptation or complex of adaptations (as of behavior, metabolism, or structure) that serves or appears to serve an important function in achieving evolutionary success (Strategy, n.d.)

*I*ntentionality. Strategy. Plan. Those are three words that are thrown around a lot in the field of higher education. We create mission and vision statements. We establish values. We discuss goals and objectives and how we plan to determine if, when, and how we have met them. We craft branding and marketing campaigns to inform others of our offerings. On a yearly basis, or more, we are asked to reflect on and strategize for our jobs. But how often do we do that for ourselves? How often do we give ample time and attention to establishing a career strategy? Not often enough, I would argue, and not with the same intentionality that we strategize for our offices. It is time to change that. It is time to give our own career strategy the same scrutiny and care that we give to our job.

### **Intentional and Spontaneous**

There are two methods to crafting your career strategy: being intentional and leaving room for the spontaneous to occur. Both are important to your strategy. That may sound odd, but it is the truth. Let me explain.

Intentionality means you make time and dedicate effort to reflect on and construct a strategy for yourself. It means that you assess what skills and experiences you possess and what skills and experiences you need to gain. Intentionality means that you reflect on and determine how you can go about demonstrating what skills and experiences you have and how you can go about gaining what you need. It means setting goals for when you want to accomplish it all, determining who can help you along the path, and understanding why you are doing all of it. Intentionality means you have purpose. It also suggests that you can answer that ever-appearing interview question, “Where do you see yourself in 1, 5, and 10 years?” I do not like that question; I never have. I think it asks us to predict something that we cannot. However, I understand why it is asked. People are trying to determine if you can plan, strategize, reflect, and project. Do you have a purpose and goals? Do you care as much about your own development as you do the development of others? How can you plan to assist students or staff in their growth if you never pay attention to your own?

But, as anyone in higher education knows, plans do not typically work out as they are written or discussed. Rather, plans are a framework for direction that ebb and flow based on environmental circumstances. It is why we have backup plans, risk management plans, and crisis management plans. We know plans go awry. And that is all right. It is the process of planning that matters more than the exact plan coming to fruition. What we should be reaching for is not perfection but, rather, progress. As long as we are making gains in the direction of our goals and visions, we are doing it right. Plus, we ought to leave room for unexpected opportunities for learning, because those are sometimes the best lessons.

Leaving room for the spontaneous speaks to the parts of your career plan that you did not know existed or that you did not specifically seek out. These are the opportunities that happen to you. Things you are “voluntold” to do. Spontaneous opportunities may be committees you are required, or asked, to sit on. They may be presentations someone seeks you out to facilitate. These chances are the random professional development webinars, connections, and conversations that fall into your lap. It may even be the job posting someone forwards to you just to say, “Hey, thought of you when I saw this!” All of these spontaneous instances can derail—mostly in a good way!—our purposeful plans, our tactical strategies. But, we must leave room for them. These are the opportunities that help open our minds to prospects that may not have been on our radar and that can initiate new directions and strategies.

Therefore, it is a “both—and” concept rather than a traditional either—or concept. We should be *both* intentional in our career strategy *and* willing to embrace the spontaneous. It is only when we achieve this “both—and” that we will be able to fully discover the possibilities that lie within our career path.

### *Strategy Is Not a Straitjacket*

Here is the thing about a plan or checklist or strategy: We often lock ourselves into it. We do not want to deviate from the plan. We want to be able to check off all the items on the list. We want to be able to say that our strategy worked like it was projected. And, we know that in reality that is extremely unlikely to occur. Some of our plans will come to fruition. We will check the majority of the items off the list. The strategy will mostly work. Here's the truth: Strategy is not a straitjacket. It is not intended to be. We do not want to lock ourselves so firmly into a strategy that we leave no room for movement, adaptability, or growth.

Let's continue with the jacket analogy. Rather than a straitjacket, strategy is like your favorite blazer: appropriate for most occasions because you can dress it up or dress it down to fit the environment, well suited (no pun intended) for you because it has been fit to your needs, and enduring if you choose a classic cut and color. It allows for both flexibility and sustainability. Eventually, though, that blazer, like your career strategy, will need to be updated. Think again of that 1-, 5-, and 10-year question. Your initial career strategy may work for the first 10 years of your career if you do it well, then it will be time to craft a new career strategy for the next phase of your career.

### **Reflecting on Your Current Strategy (or Lack Thereof)**

Now that we know what a career strategy is and is not, it is crucial for us to stop and conduct some self-assessment and engage in reflection on our current career strategy, or lack thereof. We cannot know where we are going if we do not know where we have been or where we currently are. Please take time to deeply consider the following questions (see also Appendix A):

- What are my career goals for 1, 3, 5, 10 years from now? What is my ultimate career goal? (Or, to whose job on campus do I aspire, and why? How would I go about making myself qualified for that job?)
- What kinds of educational credentials (formal and informal) do I have? Will my current education level get me to my career goal or ideal job?
- What experiences and skill sets, both job related and volunteer, do I currently have on my résumé? Are there experiences and skills that I think I need in addition to those?
- Do I have a professional development plan? Do I know how to create one?
- Am I comfortable with networking or connecting? Why or why not? What strategies do I normally use in networking or connecting?

- Do I frequently take time to reflect on my career? Do I assess where I am and where I would like to be and adjust my time and experiences to reflect my goals? What strategies can I use to reflect?

After completing the self-reflection, you should have an idea about where your career has given you ample opportunities for growth and development and where you would like to continue, or begin, further learning. You should also, hopefully, feel called to revisit these questions on a yearly basis, or more, just like you do for your job. Each time you pull out your office's strategic planning documents, also pull out this self-reflection worksheet or a similar document. Your career strategy needs the same attention you give to your office's strategy! Much like your institution's assessment administrator may provide you with guidelines in developing your office's strategic plan, the following five career strategy components can act as standards in your efforts to craft your personal career strategy and establish a fulfilling career.

## **Five Career Strategy Components**

Career strategies can be broken down into five different yet intertwined components or tactics. Some would argue that there is much overlap between the tactics, and they are right. However, there is enough distinction between each tactic to think about them independently first and then see how they weave together to create a holistic career strategy and path. The five career strategy components are (a) lifelong learning, (b) extending your experiences, (c) planning for professional development, (d) networking or connecting, and (e) self-reflection. Each component is a vital tactic to your career strategy and should be addressed in your career plan.

### *Lifelong Learning*

As educators, we espouse a belief in lifelong learning. But, do we live it? *Lifelong learning* is defined as both formal and informal learning experiences or educational opportunities. The formal aspect of lifelong learning includes but is not limited to master's and doctoral programs in education, counseling, social work, and public administration, among others. The informal opportunities for lifelong learning can consist of taking self-development and betterment courses, volunteering, shadowing, interning, attending conferences and institutes, conducting committee work, reading literature and research, and engaging in intentional conversations with colleagues and students. Lifelong learning will be discussed in Chapter 4.

### *Extending Your Experiences*

We often work with our students to assist them in deciphering what they are gaining through their experiences on campus through involvement and in whatever workplace they may be employed. Do we do this for ourselves too? Do we take time to decode our job descriptions or to discern the transferable skills that we possess through our experiences? Extending your experiences is about understanding not only what you are gaining through your formal employment but also how doing committee work, volunteering at all levels, and having personal interests outside of your “day job” can take your experiences to another level and impact your career. Extending your experiences will be considered in Chapter 5.

### *Planning for Professional Development*

Have your supervisors ever asked you to complete a “PD plan”? If not, shame on them! If so, did you take it seriously? You should have. Your professional development is key to keeping your mind and your career fresh and to constructing your career strategy. Closely tied to the concepts of lifelong learning and extending your experiences, professional development is about putting your career plan on paper and deciding when, where, and how you will continue to develop and with whom you hope to interact and learn. Now, I know you may be thinking, “PD takes money, and neither my institution nor I have any to spare.” Although professional development can be costly in some respects, it is important to get creative and think outside of the norm when planning for your professional development. Methods of resourceful and innovative professional development will be examined in Chapter 6.

### *Networking or Connecting*

How many times have you heard someone say, “This is such a small field”? My guess is frequently. However, not everyone feels this way, particularly if they are just entering the student affairs world or making the transition from another aspect of higher education or nonprofit management. It is essential that you think about the methods you want to employ to seek out others—peers, mentors, and faculty colleagues—in higher education to build relationships and assist you along your career path. We use both the terms *networking* and *connecting* because we know that people react differently to these kinds of terms. People tend to think of networking as something for the extroverted that occurs in large spaces with a seemingly excessive amount of individuals. This perception can be overwhelming; thus, we simultaneously use the term *connecting*, which we define as getting to know others through commonalities.

We encourage you to use whichever term and method feel authentic to you, in both philosophy and format. We also want to mention that politics can come into play with this tactic. Politics are real at higher education institutions, whether public or private, within the larger field, and with external constituents. Approaches to networking or connecting and navigating politics will be offered in Chapter 7.

### *Self-Reflection*

If you have ever created and implemented an assessment for one of your office's programs or events, you have likely asked students to partake in some self-reflection. Do you practice that yourself as well? If so, kudos! If not, I challenge you to do so. And, it is up to you to determine how to reflect. Some examples of how we know student affairs educators engage in reflection will be offered; however, what works for me may not work for you and vice versa. I encourage you to “do you” when it comes to reflection. Try various techniques and determine what works for you. Then recognize that practice makes productive—the more you engage in self-reflection, the more productive that process will become for you. Reflection on self-reflection will occur in Chapter 8.

### **Chapter Summary**

Intentionality. Strategy. Plan. Take some time to implement these concepts for your career, not in a way that is stifling or rigid but in a way that allows you to thrive over the long term. Know that purposeful decision making is key and that sometimes the spontaneous will occur, and you will incorporate it in the best way you know how. Ask key questions regularly to help you reflect on your career and the strategy you use to shape it. Then, use the five components—lifelong learning, extending your experiences, planning for professional development, networking or connecting, and self-reflection—that are introduced here, and further explained in subsequent chapters, to explore and establish a growth and development framework that will aid you in your career aspirations.