

 VIEW FROM THE TOP

Leading within a SEM Environment: Five Lessons Learned

By Jody Gordon

Over the span of my career, I have read many books on leadership. At no time did it ever occur to me that someday I would be asked to offer my own reflections on leadership. Why? Well, because I agree with Sundborg (2018), who states:

[L]eadership is one of the most personal of realities that tests and shapes us, makes us vulnerable and self-possessed, puts us in hundreds of enriching and challenging relationships and deepens our humanity. It is not easy to write about leadership because it is so personal and particular to the individual person (107).

But write I will. I will share some lessons learned over my 30-year career (I really did start as a 20-year-old). I certainly learned many more than five lessons, but these shaped my career the most.

One of the most important leadership lessons of my career happened when I was a young manager just 25 years old. The lesson came in the form of a cartoon: A young boy is handing his father his report card, and his grades amount to no more than a high of C with several Fs. The look on the father's face is one of shock and disappointment, but the son simply says, "I don't have to be smart, because someday I'll just hire lots of smart people to work for me." Effective leaders recognize very early in their careers their strengths as well as their shortcomings. When they do, they park their egos at the door and hire those who possess skills they

simply do not have. The risk is that these direct reports may outshine their leader; the reward is that they may outshine their leader. Herein lies the first of five lessons I learned about effective strategic enrollment management (SEM) leadership: Surround yourself with a strong team. The other four lessons are "count everything that moves"; "be the best salesperson ever"; "students first, always"; and "have courage with a splash of great wine."

Simply the Best, Better Than All the Rest...

As I reflect on the many years I have had the privilege of supporting students within student affairs/student services, it is hard to believe that it all began when I was a 20-year-old residence assistant and peer student advisor. I was incredibly appreciative to have received these well-paying student positions on campus. I was, after all, your typical starving student with student loans. But more important, I was humbled that someone with much more experience than I thought I could provide something valuable to first-year students. This experience shaped my career immensely. Helping other students navigate their journeys in higher education is rewarding work. In addition to teaching undergraduate criminology students, supporting students' learning outside of the classroom has been the focus of my career for almost 30 years. Clearly, I could not do it alone.

I was just 25 years old when I was promoted to a managerial role at a university. That experience taught me a lot. I knew nothing about leading and supporting others (all of whom were senior to me in age and work experience). And while I would like to tell you a wonderful story of a supervisor who mentored me in those early days, that is not at all what happened. Instead, my supervisor was an insecure leader with a temper. What I did learn in those early days was what not to do as a leader. I recognized that I could not manage this alone; I needed those around me to feel included and supported in order to provide the requisite services to students. I needed them, and what they needed from me was to feel supported and, most important, to be shielded from the wrath of an angry senior manager. Eventually I left this position, but not before I saw the power of surrounding myself with skillful people.

At the very heart of a SEM-aware institution is an understanding that student success is a community effort. A student's experience is not driven exclusively by what top leaders do. Everyone must be SEM ready if students are to be successful: Every hire is critical to positively influencing a student's learning in and out of the classroom. As Kerlin (2008) states:

[Strategic] enrollment management is a comprehensive and coordinated process that enables a college to identify enrollment goals that are allied with its mission, its strategic plan, its environment, and its resources and to reach those goals through the effective integration of administrative processes, student services, curriculum planning, and market analysis (11).

During a SEM plan "roadshow" at one university I worked at, departments including Human Resource Management, Facilities, and Institutional Technology wondered what their roles had to do with SEM and student success. A deeper understanding of what an "effective integration of administrative processes" really means for student success helps clarify why what they do matters and why who we surround ourselves with as leaders matters greatly to achieving our institutional mission. With every hire, I still ask myself, "How will this candidate further the success of our students?"

While we don't get it right every time, when we do, the impact on student success is powerful.

With whom we surround ourselves is not limited to whom we hire. We also can surround ourselves with great colleagues. As Bing (2000) says, "Don't try to do it without pals" (21). While it has always meant more work, I have tried to involve myself in projects and governance bodies within our profession at a provincial level (for those in the United States, the state level) as well as at the national level. I am fortunate to be surrounded by many skillful colleagues from whom to learn and with whom to share expertise and ideas. And if you are lucky, one of those amazing colleagues could someday become your great supervisor. Managing up is just as important as supervising your team. Don't forget to care for and feed your boss, too. With any luck, they are part of the great team with which you get to surround yourself.

Count Everything That Moves

Skillful leaders know that an evidence-rich environment is critical to sound decision making.

As Bing (2000) so aptly states, "Princes who fail to sweat even the tiniest numbers tend to pay for it later" (129). Data are the very foundation upon which all SEM plans ought to be built. According to Harrington, Hoffhehr, and Reid (1998):

Numbers help you answer the three basic questions concerning every decision: (1) Am I getting the results I want? (2) Is there too much variation in the results I get? and (3) Are the results I get stable over time (xvi).

In a student affairs context, this means asking such questions as "How do I know what impact those programs...have on student learning, retention, and overall success?" (Bingham and Bureau 2015, 9). In a SEM-ready environment where student success is the ultimate goal, we are required to lead through assessment and data analysis in all that we do. When preparing a university SEM plan, I ask the institutional research office to literally "count everything that moves." One example is a plan that now reflects almost 20 pages of data analysis and allowed that university to put urban legends to rest;

it also confirmed some gaps in their knowledge that they could now fill.

Data analysis of institutional programs and services is a must. No new service or program should ever be offered without first asking how its impact on student success will be determined. In other words, how will we ensure that we are doing no harm but rather furthering students' success? What data needs to be collected and analyzed in order to answer this question? As leaders, it is our job to ensure that data analysis is occurring throughout the division and that a culture of evidence-based decision making is being instilled among our team. For effective decision making to occur, "analysis will have to be a broad capability of employees, rather than the province of a few 'rocket scientists' with quantitative expertise" (Davenport and Harris 2007, 16). This certainly can be taught, but if you make it a priority in hiring for certain positions within your division, then you will continue to surround yourself with skillful people (lesson number one). Yet keeping these rich data analyses to ourselves is not how we sing praises of student success.

Being the Best Salesperson Ever

An African proverb says, "As the water hole shrinks, the animals look at each other differently." As higher education began to experience fiscal challenges (as a result of decreasing enrollments, reduced government funding, and frozen student tuition), student affairs/services found itself under attack. "Under attack" may be strong language, but many student affairs/services divisions had their budgets slashed, and senior leaders were let go in favor of amalgamating the division under another vice president or in some cases under a less experienced person. In my province, for example, I was one of just a small number of vice presidents overseeing a stand-alone student affairs/services division; most report to either the provost or the vice president for administration. As Bresciani (2012) reminds us, "Student affairs makes a unique institutional contribution that requires specific educational and professional preparation" (1). Or in the words of a former university president with whom I worked, "it is imperative to have the 'voice of the student' at the senior leadership table."

This shrinking water hole did, however, force many student affairs/services division leaders to take action in a way we never had before. First, as leaders we became much more aware of the ongoing need to evaluate and disseminate the results of the impact of our programs and services on student success (lesson number two: data analysis); second, we began to seek out external funding sources through sponsors and organizations looking to support youth leadership and development in the broader community. Being reliant on external funding organizations made it critical to demonstrate an ROI and so reinforced the need to evaluate and share the results of programmatic and service impact on student success (again, lesson number two).

In order to stave off further funding cuts and/or to acquire and maintain external funding sources, leaders in student affairs/services have had to become skilled at telling the story of student learning and student success. When that story is tied to ensuring that the institution is meeting its strategic enrollment management goals, the impact on budgetary decisions can be powerful. Effective story-telling can only occur in a data-rich environment (again, lesson two). Without data, you are just another leader with an opinion—or, worse, an opinion based solely on anecdotal information.

In Keeling's (2004) pinnacle work, *Learning Reconsidered*, student affairs is viewed as "integral to the learning process because of the opportunities it provides students to learn through action, contemplation, reflection, and emotional engagement as well as information acquisition" (12). While we are humble leaders, we should be anything but that when it comes to sharing the impact of our division on student success. After all, student success is paramount to all that we do as a college/university.

We should not, however, confuse data with information. "Data are what we 'process'; information is our output" (Chrisakis and Demeter 2015, 124). Find ways to disseminate information about the impact of what you do. Don't be shy in asking to be on agendas for various meetings where other decision leaders are present; better yet, bring some of your students along to tell that story for you. The most impactful way to share the

successes of your division is through the words of your students. This brings me to my fourth lesson learned.

Students First, Always!

To use a less violent analogy, putting students first is a mountain I am always willing to climb. Several years ago, I was faced with the difficult task of needing to evolve a very expensive, boutique, single-subject-focused, student learning support service by expanding its reach to a full-fledged, comprehensive, multi-subject offering of student learning support. This meant changing the roles of current staff (but thankfully did not mean staff layoffs). We had the data necessary to support this decision, but as we began to roll out the changes, an outcry from a small group of individuals made the environment for change very tense (a petition was started, public protests occurred, and meetings were disrupted). But we knew these changes were best for students, and we never lost sight of the main reason we were making them: student success. This took courage, conviction, and an unwavering commitment to students first, always.

In rare cases, always putting students first can mean the difference between life and death. I had the pleasure of working with a strong student leader at one university. Tragically, she became a victim of a violent sexual assault. I did everything I could to support her, including checking in on her regularly and ensuring she was getting the professional support she needed. Months later, she disclosed that when one such call had been made by me, she was seriously contemplating suicide. That call of concern was just enough to prevent that fatal act. Her story grounds me in the work I continue to do to support and engage our students. But some days it can be challenging, and our commitment to our profession is tested. This brings me to the fifth leadership lesson learned.

Courage With a Splash of Wine

There were some days when I was unsure whether I was the vice president, students or the vice president of responding to litigious behavior. Human rights complaints, lawsuits, privacy requests, harassment complaints, police investigations into criminal activity, *etc...* all leave us feeling a little weary and wondering if this is what we signed up for. Student affairs/services has become very complicated, but the joys are still plentiful. We must not lose sight of the latter. When in doubt, ask yourself what courageous decisions you have made that resulted in powerful change for your students.

We must have the courage to make bold decisions. This can be daunting, so sometimes we go home at night and indulge in a glass of wine. The point is to not just do what makes you happy at work but to also do what makes you happy outside of work. Travel, sports, fitness, watching great movies, reading a wonderful book—the key is to have some fun. You don't have to be a courageous leader *all* of the time.

Final Thoughts

As Bontrager (2004) reminds us, “Strategic enrollment management (SEM) is a concept and process that enables the fulfillment of institutional mission and students’ educational goal” (12). I would add that without strong leadership, it is not possible to fulfill the institutional mission or for students to achieve their educational goals. The five lessons learned—surrounding yourself with a strong team; encouraging a data-rich environment; being the best salesperson of student success; ensuring that students come first, always; and finally, having the courage to make difficult decisions—have shaped my career and who I am as a leader today. SEM is the canvas on which I paint my personal picture of leadership every day. It has been far from perfect (I tend to stray outside of the lines), but it has been colorful and rich.

About the Authors



Jody Gordon

Jody Gordon currently serves as a Senior Consultant for the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, a non-profit organization in the United States who is a leader in strategic enrollment management and admissions and registrar services. Previously, Ms. Gordon served as the Vice President, Students and Enrollment Management, at the University of the Fraser Valley (UFV), Abbotsford, B.C., Canada, and prior to this she held the position of Associate Vice President, Students at Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU), Surrey, B.C., Canada. Ms. Gordon has worked in postsecondary

education since 1992, beginning her career at Simon Fraser University before joining KPU in 1998 and UFV in 2012. She has held progressively responsible positions as an Academic Advisor, Associate Director of Advising and Enrollment Services, Registrar and Chief Student Affairs Officer. In addition to Ms. Gordon's administrator roles, she has taught first-year criminology students. Her broad experience in the classroom, in enrollment services, and in student affairs has allowed her to lead universities in developing such retention initiatives as an Early Alert Referral system, Academic Boost camps for at risk students, a behavioral intervention team, peer-to-peer tutoring and mentoring

and sexualized violence policy and prevention/education awareness programming.

Ms. Gordon completed a First Class Honours Bachelor of Arts degree in 1992 and a Master of Arts degree in 1996 from Simon Fraser University. She was selected as the recipient of the 2009 Strategic Enrollment Management Award of Excellence in the Canadian Institutions category, an award co-sponsored by AACRAO and Education Systems Inc. Ms. Gordon presents regularly at higher education conferences across North America and has published articles on such topics as enrollment management, student success initiatives, the mobile transfer student, and leadership in higher education.

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