



Podcast: Student Affairs One Thing

Release Date: September 27, 2021

Episode Title: 02 - Dr. Larry Roper

Website: <https://www.studentaffairs.com/podcast/>

Summary: We chat with Dr. Larry Roper, who served as Vice Provost for Student Affairs from 1995-2014 at Oregon State University. He has held numerous positions in student affairs, including Director of Housing; Associate Dean of Students; Coordinator of Multicultural Affairs; and Vice President for Student Affairs/Dean of Students.

B E G I N T R A N S C R I P T

Stuart Brown: Welcome to Student Affairs One Thing, a podcast that asks a simple question of seasoned student affairs professionals - what is one thing you have learned that has helped shape your professional career? I'm your host, Stuart Brown, founder of StudentAffairs.com, one of the most accessed websites for student affairs professionals. On our pages, we have the most cost effective job posting board, listing hundreds of open student services positions, a wide range of webinars and a virtual exhibit hall. We would like to thank our sponsor, the National Society of Leadership and Success, the largest leadership honor society in the nation, providing an accredited five step leadership development program for members to build their leadership skills With chapters at over 700 colleges across the country. The N. S. L. S delivers guaranteed student engagement, increased student retention and is financially self-sustainable. Learn more at nsls.org.

On today's episode, I am very pleased to have Dr. Larry Roper. He is Professor Emeritus in the School of Language, Culture and Society at Oregon State University. Previously, he served as Vice Provost for Student Affairs. He has also served in the following positions: Director of Housing, Associate Dean of Students, Coordinator of Multicultural Affairs and Vice President for Student Affairs, Dean of Students.

So Larry, I guess that qualifies you for being a seasoned student affairs professional. Welcome to the program.

Dr. Larry Roper: Well, thank you. Yes and I have the salt in my hair to prove that I am seasoned. So, yes.

Stuart Brown: Well unfortunately this is an audio podcast but we'll post a picture of you on the website. So you are definitely a seasoned professional. So what is your one thing?

Dr. Larry Roper: That education can save lives. I attended a small school. I grew up in Akron Ohio, the first person in my family to go to college. People talk about being a first generation college student, well I was a first generation high school graduate.

My family, neither, my parents graduated from high school, so I made the decision to attend a small school, Heidelberg College, about 100 miles away from where I grew up in Akron, Ohio. I had never spent a night away from home prior to going to college. So my brother who also graduated the same year as I, who was actually going to be going off to Kent State University on a football scholarship, and a couple of friends of mine drove me to college and dropped me off. I lasted for two days and walked out to the interstate after two days and hitchhiked home with the idea that I was done with college.

My mother had different perspective on that. And after being interrogated by her, she got me to confess that the reason I wanted to leave was because I was scared and because I said I'm scared and she asked me what I had to be afraid of and I told her that when I lay down at night to try to fall asleep, I could hear crickets and I could hear birds and she said that's just the sound of nature. And my instinctive response to her was that's not what's natural to me. I'm used to hearing sirens. I'm used to hearing horns honking. I'm used to hearing loud music and glass breaking and people yelling and that quiet is scary.

And so she gave me an ultimatum, none of which involved staying in her house. So my cousin, she said well I'll have your cousin Harold take you back. So my cousin Harold, who was about five years older than me, drove me back through these country roads to this small rural town and along the way he's you know, shaking his head, so I don't know bro, they got these cottonwood trees out here, you know, they be hanging brothers out here and I said you know Harold, I'm looking for courage, this is not helping.

So he dropped me off and I was playing football and so I would, you know, go to football practice and then I was just sort of really, I was just in the throes of just sort of like it was sort of a depression but it wasn't a diagnosed depression, but I certainly did not have energy for the college experience. Fortunately or unfortunately, halfway through the term at the seven week mark, they gave us a report card and basically said if the term ended now this would be your grades.

I had a .75 and the Dean of Students called me in and said, you know, Mr. Roper, Larry, you seem to be, you seem to be struggling. Let's talk about how I can be helpful. And I was absolutely embarrassed and ashamed because the context in which I grew up and I grew up, you know, I graduated high school at the top of my class and so I, nobody ever had to talk to me about grades, nobody ever talked to me about academic performance and I would just absolutely humiliated and I just sort of sucked it up and I said I'll be fine.

I said thanks, I appreciate it. I tried to be as respectful as I could, but basically I was saying, you know, get out of my face, I don't need your help. So I went, developed a routine where every day after football practice I would go to our library and they had where you could actually check out headphones because they had these turntables in study carrels. And so I had three record albums. I would, you know, take my albums, take my books put on the headphones and study.

I ended up finishing the term, you know, 2.8 or something G. P. A. And then obviously graduated there in very good standing and went right on to graduate school after that. But what I found out during that experience was that, first of all, the first time I encountered the world that was different than the world that I knew. My first instinct was turning around at the end of the experience. And right now when I look back on my professional formation, you know, my experience at Heidelberg College was the best thing that ever happened to me.

It introduced me to a world that I didn't know existed. It gave me knowledge certainly that I did not have prior to then, but it certainly gave me a career path that I never knew existed. And that more than anything, what it showed me was that education has incredible power to transform and in some way it saved my life. One of the things you didn't mention was that during my time at Oregon State University, I served a year and a half as the interim dean of the College of Liberal Arts.

And when I was at my first meeting with liberal arts faculty, they asked, what do you know about the liberal arts? And my first response was, the liberal arts saved my life. And that's because of the power of education. So what happened to that though, was that I found a success model. The Dean of Students who called me in began to model for me what I believe a successful education educator looked like. He was incredibly empathic. He was caring. He was other centered, admit it was all about other people to him.

It was all about their success and it was about him, quite frankly, reaching out to people and making sure that he did everything he could to give them a lifeline. That this is your source of hope. And this is a place where you can go for refuge. You can come to my office and just need to get away from it. And so for me, I came out of that with an idea that education has a...is really is life giving in this life saving.

Stuart Brown: That is such a powerful story. And it really resonates with me as someone who has been in the field for many, many decades working with students. And I think people that listen to this podcast to understand that that little episode where you were in the Dean's office and maybe half listening because like you said, you were embarrassed, but that changed your life, changed the direction and then to be able to take that throughout your entire career to understand that and to go back to remember that. I think in the field sometimes we don't recognize the influence that we might have over the students, that it is just a chance for them to maybe vent, listen. They don't know where to go. And these wayward students, sometimes they always seem to end up at the Dean of Students office. Like you don't know where to go, go to the Dean of Students. I don't know what they do, but just go to them.

Dr. Larry Roper: Yeah. And you know, and the thing I found was that, well some people may say, well he was just doing his job. For me. It was like, it wasn't like he called me in because it was his job. You know, that he saw the numbers and it's like I gotta call in any student who's struggling.

But in the end when I reflect on it, it was such an act of service to humanity and it was such an act of humanness, that he was willing to reach out and to create space for me to be able to at least ask for what I needed. Or to give me an invitation to be able to say that I do need something. That for me was very powerful

and his name was Bob Olsen and he's the Emeritus Dean of Students of Heidelberg. And you know, I had the privilege of serving on the board of trustees for Heidelberg for a number of years. And so I got to see him regularly and just reminded him that he was the model for my career. That when I thought about who I wanted to be, I wanted to be Bob Olsen.

Stuart Brown: Sometimes when we're looking at programs for the campus - what can we do? I think sometimes we get caught up in what's the latest fad or what can we do? And really it's sometimes it's just going back to the basics - being there to listen, to provide assistance. We don't have to answer or have all the answers.

But just being able to have a space like you said, for those students to come in and like you did. You left and you said, ok, I need to solve my problem.

Dr. Larry Roper: Yeah.

Stuart Brown: And you were given the opportunity.

Dr. Larry Roper: If he hadn't caught me, I would have been, I would not have named my problem. I would have just gotten to the end of the term and then I would have panicked at the end of the term when I saw my grades or, and maybe at some point where I would have woke up myself and said, I got to get out of this. I got to get out of this. You know, this malaise that I'm in.

Stuart Brown: So do you like crickets now or do you still prefer sirens? Well, you know, I lived for 25 years in Corvallis Oregon, which is where Oregon State University is. And um, so I've come to love crickets. I've come to love the outdoors.

Glad to hear that. Larry, I want to thank you for sharing that. That is like I said, it was a powerful story that I hope people that listen to this podcast can really take as part of maybe what they need to do or to consider for their professional career in student affairs.

Dr. Larry Roper: Thank you.

Stuart Brown: You have been listening to the Student Affairs One Thing, a podcast that asked a simple question of seasoned student affairs professionals. What is one thing you have learned that has helped shape your professional career? My guest today has been Dr. Larry Roper. I've been your host, Stuart Brown, the developer of studentaffairs.com, one of the most accessed websites by student affairs professionals. I hope you will join us next time for another episode of the podcast.

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