



Podcast: Student Affairs One Thing

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Summary: We chat with Dr. Shannon Ellis, Vice President for Student Services at the University of Nevada, Reno.

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

Stuart Brown: Welcome to the 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, the founder of StudentAffairs.com, one of the most accessed websites by student affairs professionals. On our pages, we have the most cost-effective job hosting board, listing hundreds of open student services positions, a wide range of webinars and a virtual exhibit hall.

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On today's episode, I am very pleased to have Dr. Shannon Ellis, Vice President for Student Services at the University of Nevada, Reno.

Dr. Ellis has also served as Dean of Students and Academic Support Services at the Evergreen State College and has held a number of administrative positions at the University of Southern California. She has served as President of the National Association for Student Personnel Administrators and has presented at many regional and national conferences. Welcome to the program.

Dr. Shannon Ellis: Thank you very much, Stu. It's great. You're a longtime friend and colleague. Really a pleasure.

Stuart Brown: It's been too long. I won't give the...

Dr. Shannon Ellis: We won't go into that. Right,

Stuart Brown: So, Shannon, What is your one thing?

Dr. Shannon Ellis: Well, thanks for asking because working in this profession, it was hard to come up with the one thing, but once I hit on it, I was absolutely committed to sharing this with you and your listeners. For me, it is particularly true at this point in time, after decades and decades of working in this field, that I have learned that students raising their voices and shaking their fists at me when they are protesting something around institutional policy or the federal government or everything in between, that those angry loud students are not the enemy, they are my students.

And this was an epiphany for me after years of working on different campuses where student activism has been so profound and such an integral part of the culture. So not wringing my hands and worrying over bad press or how people would perceive the university because our students were protesting about free speech policy or a speaker who was very far right or lack of response when it comes to Title IX or rape protocols, equity and inclusion. All of these are critical topics. And so for me, several years ago now when the Charlottesville white supremacy rallies were going on, there was a picture of a young man, young white man holding a tiki torch that became one of the photos that you will see over and over and over again for whenever a story is regarding Charlottesville and he was a student at the University of Nevada Reno and this happened in August it was off campus. He wasn't an enrolled student.

This was something he did on his own. You can imagine the outrage of many faculty and students in particular and some staff about him being a student and thus allowing him to come back to campus to finish up his degree. And it was at that moment that I watched a lot of colleagues really hunker down about the reputation of, they're going to think we're all white supremacists and we really have to deal with this fairly and equitably, but we also have to understand the bad PR and for me it really helped to have this reframing that the angry students about this individual and what he represented really needed to have voice, give voice to this in continuous protests.

And that while people were worried about them and almost putting down those who were showing their shock and dismay, I really found it helpful to reframe it and go out and listen deeply and they were criticizing me. They were criticizing the institution. So it was very deeply personal. But what helped me tremendously is something I try to share with other colleagues going through the same thing in any way, shape or form, and it really was to listen to the students and even if they don't want to engage in dialogue with you, they want to hate you, but they don't want to talk with you.

Don't give up, stay there, stand by them, stay with them, keep inviting them to the table, keep having open forums where maybe one person shows up, then three or four people show up and this is what happened after this incident. We had many open forums and slowly but surely people came out to walk up to the microphone and express why they understood we had to keep this individual in school or why they were against that for me as an educator was a profound response from the campus that I wouldn't trade for anything.

Students would walk up to the microphone and say I wasn't going to say anything tonight, but I'm so mad and I'm going to speak right now and I would be right there listening because they were finding their voice as an educator. How can you not love that? Okay, they hate me. But that's beside the point. We're educators and to help students find that activist gene in them that I hope we can cultivate into social leadership and really help them over their time at our university. And I've maintained relationships with many, many of those students.

It's not about liking each other as much as these are my students. They're engaged in something really important to them, important to me. So I use that as an example of they're not the enemy. They're developing. They're experiencing life.

Stuart Brown: And I think that's a great example, especially for people entering the field because you're confronted with that. And the first reaction is to panic, go into sort of circle the wagons mode and just let's try and get rid of this problem as soon as possible. Put it under the rug, let's capitulate and not do sort of the hard work that you're talking about because that is hard and like you said, you're having students say nasty things about you both privately, publicly and, and that's not easy for maybe grad students, new professionals really, anyone, but to just sort of hold your ground. And I guess it seems that you probably had a lot of support at the campus because it's very easy for colleagues or maybe the president, board of trustees to say, no, we're not going to do this. We're going to just cut it off and move forward.

Dr. Shannon Ellis: I think that's a great point. Stu. You really have to have the support of your president, more than anything. And then the other piece, thanks for bringing that up, was dealing with younger staff, especially from marginalized and underrepresented populations who are looking at me like, hey, I thought you were cool. I mean, I thought you understood. And so that's the, the important listening to all sides and the impact. You know, you can't just say, well, it's the First Amendment, you know, you can't just do that anymore.

So you're absolutely right. Thanks for bringing that up. The empathy and the time you need to spend with your own staff and graduate students who are in those early stages. I really want them to understand that eventually you can get to a developmental component in anything like this. You have to believe that or you can't work in this profession.

Stuart Brown: Well Shannon, I want to thank you so much for your one thing. I think this is very enlightening and especially for a lot of these hot button issues that are just always prevalent on the campus. And it doesn't have to be at such a high level that you're talking about. It could be something that is just maybe campus focused. It's not nationally or state focus, but to really understand that it's the listening and working with the students. I think what you said, they are not the enemy.

Dr. Shannon Ellis: They are not the enemy. If you can hold that in your head while they're angry at you...these are your students. And if you can keep telling yourself that you really, you really can get to a point of dialogue. It won't happen right away, I can assure you of that.

But sometimes I say, Stu, what if they're right? What if we are this white supremacist institution that's 150 years old? What if they're right that this policy is anti...? Really and I make myself sit with that for a while and it's very helpful.

Stuart Brown: I'd like to thank Dr. Shannon Ellis for coming onto the One Thing. This has been the podcast, the Student Affairs One Thing, where we ask a simple question of seasoned student affairs professionals - what is one thing you have learned that has helped shape your professional career.

I've been your host Stuart Brown, the founder of Student Affairs.com, one of the most accessed websites by student affairs professionals. I hope you will join us next time for another episode of the Student Affairs One Thing.

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