



Podcast: Student Affairs One Thing

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Episode Title: 11. Dr. Susan Dunton

Summary: We chat with Dr. Susan Dunton, former President of NHTI – Concord's Community College, Academic Dean at Bethel College, and Dean of Students at the University of Connecticut.

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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.

On today's episode, I am very pleased to have Dr. Susan Dunton. Susan has had a long career spanning both student affairs and academic affairs. Some highlights include interim Vice President for Academic Affairs at the Boston Architectural College, NHTI Concord's Community College presidency, the Academic Dean at Bethel University, Provost at Fisher College and the Dean of Students at the University of Connecticut. Welcome to the program Susan.

Dr. Susan Dunton: Thank you, Stuart. It's delightful to be working with you again.

Stuart Brown: Yes, yes, it's been. I don't know if we should tell people how long, but it's been A few years.

Dr. Susan Dunton: It's been almost 40.

Stuart Brown: Oh no! Well, Susan, what is your one thing?

Dr. Susan Dunton: My one thing boils down to one word and that one word is stamina. So, the one thing is you have to have stamina working as a higher ed professional and I'll tell you a story about how that word, how that one thing was presented to me. I was at Fontbonne College in the middle point of my career as an associate dean working for a vice president who was moving on to a presidency and I eventually was asked to be interim vice president for academic affairs. This newly appointed president who is going on to another institution said Susan, you can do this, but it's what will matter is if you have the stamina to do this work, because it's all encompassing. She said, and I'm not quite sure what she meant by this, but it was a compliment, she said, you have the whole package, but will you have the stamina to keep up with this work? And that has resonated with me for many, many years in many circumstances, in many positions, because stamina means much more than perseverance or determination, because with stamina you need not just the physical, but also the mental ability to keep up. And it's an enduring and prolonged exercise that helps you build strength to get through the demands of any position, any work that you're doing, but also linked to that is perseverance, but that's about doing something difficult and getting it done. It's a single-minded kind of thing and it's different from determination, which is a timely kind of thing with purpose. So, I kind of look at those three things like a triangle with stamina at the top and perseverance and determination at the bottom with your ultimate goal or career aspiration in the middle.

Stuart Brown: I think stamina is such a great one word for individuals listening to this podcast, especially maybe graduate students or new professionals that maybe have dipped their toe in the waters during those first few years, but will soon realize if they haven't already, that stamina is very important, that positions and student affairs are not going to be 8:30 to 4:30 or 9 to 5. That sometimes it is going to be all day, all night into the next day. A lot of what we do is crisis management and you just can't close the door and say, well I'm out of here. So, I think both the physicality, but then when you have that crisis on campus, the mental aspect and I think a lot of times we don't really look at the mental aspect, it's sort of just, oh suck it up and let's move forward.

Dr. Susan Dunton: Right. It's very much a prolonged persistence of keeping at what you're doing and being able to maintain it for an extended period of time because we all know in student affairs there can be weeks at a time where it's one crisis or individual student who you need to attend to that really draws a lot from you personally and professionally, and it, it's hard to keep up with that and you need to figure out how to put those situations in different boxes. So, you can go on to take care of yourself and self-care is so important in higher education, academic and student affairs and we don't teach enough of that, but then you need to figure out how to move forward and get through the next day and also how to take care of yourself.

Stuart Brown: And that was going to be my next question was, okay, we have the stamina. You need that stamina because of X, Y and Z. So, what do you do in order to, in a sense, get over the stamina or to use the stamina to your advantage? You had mentioned to compartmentalize maybe to realize that this will be over at one point. Are there other bits of advice that you can give to people listening?

Dr. Susan Dunton: Well, you know, there are all the basic things we tell ourselves and others what you should do to be taking care of yourself, eating well, exercise, vitamins, yoga, whatever nourishes your soul. And I think all of us will admit that very few of us are very good at balancing all of those things. So, we need to find what unbalanced actually works for you. So, you can continue with the stamina. And sometimes it's just reading a book, zoning out for a day, getting off of campus for a period of time, but also one of the things I've learned in the last couple of years when I've had a real hectic period of time, I quietly say to myself, time passes and you will get through this. Time passes. And actually at this stage in my career, I don't for my life, now that I'm relatively retired, I don't want to say time passes because you don't want time to pass too quickly, but it does pass and you get through it.

Stuart Brown: What about someone you can speak with or a mentor? Would you include that in your, in your package of ideas to work on that? That stamina?

Dr. Susan Dunton: Oh absolutely. Of course, the woman who was my academic affairs mentor who spoke kindly about me having the whole package, she has been a mentor for a period of time and I think the longer you are in higher education, the more mentors you're going to have and I think we've all had mentors as we've grown up. I don't know about other people, but I don't hesitate to pick up the phone and call people. And it may be out of the blue and another thing and this may be because of the pandemic. I've gone out of my way to get in touch with people that I haven't talked to in a long time and just to be able to talk about what I'm doing, what I have been doing, what are they doing? I have a person who has been an incredible mentor since I was a grad student. She now lives just an hour away and we get together and share and she's been a wonderful person to me throughout my entire career and we're good friends.

Stuart Brown: Well, Susan, thank you so much for sharing. I think this is something that a lot of people don't always realize even though it is something that impacts our personal and professional lives all the time. But we don't always maybe see it and understand it until maybe we're right in the midst of it.

Dr. Susan Dunton: That's absolutely true. When you're having your own downtime or literally your own crisis, you realize that you need that prolonged strength that stamina and you need to figure out how to build it up as a reserve again.

Stuart Brown: Thank you, Susan. You have been listening 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've been your host, Stuart Brown, the founder of StudentAffairs.com, one of the most accessed website 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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