



Podcast: Student Affairs One Thing

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Summary: We chat with Ann Comerford, Interim Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs at the University of Illinois Springfield.

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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 shaped your professional career? I'm your host Stuart Brown, founder of StudentAffairs.com, one of the most accessed websites by 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.

I am very pleased to have Ann Comerford, who is the Interim Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs at the University of Illinois Springfield. She has also served as the Executive Director of the Student Union at the school. Previously, she was the Director of the university union at Western Illinois University. Welcome to the program, Ann.

Ann Comerford: Hi, thanks for having me.

Stuart Brown: So Ann, what is your one thing?

Ann Comerford: So I think my one thing is curiosity. It is the one thing that I think has served me well and I keep coming back to that I enjoy being a curious professional and a curious human being.

Stuart Brown: Was there an epiphany about that? Something that happened in your previous years at one of the student unions where that curiosity sort of popped up.

Ann Comerford: I think a lot of it comes from the fact that I went to a liberal arts undergrad where teaching critical thinking and pushing students to find answers and providing links between maybe it's my art history class and my political science class that taught me to be inquisitive and thoughtful on what I was doing. But then I didn't really have a clear path. I didn't even come straight into student affairs. I bummed around for a little while. So I think that curiosity got me into the field and then just trying different avenues of different work. That's curiosity. Asking questions. Curiosity. How does this work? Being a problem solver. Doing all of those things led to the next experience, the next opportunity, the next title. So having curiosity builds your skill set because you learn things, you fail at things. But I'm just constantly curious.

Stuart Brown: What do you think about today's students? Do you think they have that curiosity?

Ann Comerford: I think some do. I don't know if there's as much curiosity because the answers sometimes seem to be so easy or just Google it or it's right in front of you or someone just provides it. I appreciate the fact that we're asked more and more to provide more pathways for students, a clarity on why they're seeking the education that they're seeking, what this degree will provide for them. I appreciate all that. I understand all that, but my degrees are in political science and theology that doesn't necessarily scream, oh, student affairs and student unions, but I use them every day. So I think it's too bad. We just don't have a little more room for education for education's sake. That leads to curiosity and figuring things out. I mean, I started as an art major, so I miss that, but on the other hand the cost of education is rather high, so that also doesn't help with curiosity.

Stuart Brown: Do you ever get students that come to you talking about majors or direction? You know, they don't have that set field--I want to be an engineer, I want to be a teacher, I want to do this, but they're exploring and they might just come to you and just ask advice and then maybe through that conversation talking about this curiosity and well here's my background and I'm going to share with you that I was a political science

major. Maybe political science is something for student affairs out there, but you know, I was a political science major.

Ann Comerford: A lot of us were.

Stuart Brown: Right. And when I was in school everyone said, oh so you're going to law school? And I said, well no, I just like politics. I'm just very curious about that. I have no clue. I was actually trying to be a journalist when I realized that wasn't going to happen. And I gave myself some career counseling and said, well, you know, I enjoyed my undergraduate years and that's what led me to student affairs. But do you ever have those conversations with students?

Ann Comerford: All the time. You know, a lot of student employees, great opportunities in the student union that, you know, it was brand new here at UIS. And you know, it's one of the reasons I came here, to open a new building. When they've never had a student union before. And they're like wow this is so cool working here and doing these things and I'm like you know it can be a career, like this is my job and so that sparked some conversation. Our top majors are public policy, public administration, political science. So we have some really great conversations and that we're here in the capital and what our work that, you know, what we do and how it overlaps with some of their interests and things that they do on a day to day basis and see in Springfield and the capital and what they see across campus and student leadership and there's all those types of conversations to be had and I think it makes them thoughtful about oh what does that mean it look like? And our career is very different than it was when I entered it and talking about why do you want to do this work? What feeds your interest in potentially going into student affairs or working in this world. And kind of pricking their curiosity about what I do and what the day to day and what that work is because it's not all just setting up chairs for a banquet or the next comedian and things like that. There's a lot of different interactions than when I first started in this.

Stuart Brown: I think what you said earlier is, I think it's kind of sad that in today's world we don't maybe let students be curious enough because of the cost of higher ed and students feeling I have to succeed right out of the start gate and to come up with that career and they can't just take classes because they're interested in religion or political science or art history and maybe one day that will change. I don't know.

Ann Comerford: Well, and it used to be as well, and I think this has always been the case. This is a challenge to people that are programmers. You know, you bring a lecture or art film series or a variety of music, to go and appreciate that takes a level of curiosity in hearing from someone that maybe you don't know or hearing a type of music that you don't know, maybe going to an event that isn't your circle of friends. Those are all activities that take a level of curiosity. I think that is a challenge among young people today. And it was when I was in school. I just happened to be very curious and loved going to all of that. But now we have to make it like a class requirement to go to see a speaker on campus. And that's not always and not all campuses, you know, you bring in a name. People are going to go to the name. But I do think that's something that a lot of programmers and student activity folks really, when you think about the foundational work of programming, it really is about exposure and challenge and helping develop citizens and got to be curious to participate in that.

Stuart Brown: Ann, I want to thank you for sharing your one thing.

Ann Comerford: Thank you.

Stuart Brown: I would say so far this season, no one has come up with curiosity.

Ann Comerford: I appreciate that.

Stuart Brown: I think it is something that we wish students would be more curious and when we have different types of programs and that's the challenge to get them to maybe step out of their comfort zone and be a little more curious.

Ann Comerford: I wish everyone in the world was a little more curious.

Stuart Brown: I've been speaking with Ann Comerford, who is the Interim Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs at the University of Illinois Springfield. Previously, the Executive Director of the Student Union there and the Director of the university union at Western Illinois University.

You have been listening 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've been your host, Stuart Brown, the founder 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 Student Affairs One Thing.

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