



Podcast: Student Affairs One Thing

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Summary: We chat with Dr. George McClellan, professor of higher education at the University of Mississippi.

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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.

On today's program, I am very pleased to have Dr. George McClellan. George is a professor of higher education at the University of Mississippi. He has been in the field of student affairs for over 40 years. Previously, he was the Vice Chancellor of Student affairs at Indiana University Purdue University and Vice president for Student Development at Dickinson State University. He is the author of numerous books on higher education. Welcome to the program, George.

Dr. George McClellan: Thank you sir. I'm really glad to be here. I'm a big fan of Stuart Brown and StudentAffairs.com. So delighted to be here. I have used the website and I have used job postings and so I am a customer and a pleased client.

Stuart Brown: Oh, I like that and I've known George for many, many years. So it's a pleasure to have him on the One Thing. So George, what is your one thing?

Dr. George McClellan: I would say never ask permission. I, to whatever extent people think I'm successful in this field, people seem to think that I probably just have a lot of people fooled, but to whatever extent I've been successful in student affairs, and when I say successful, it doesn't mean sort of, you know, build attention for myself. It means make a difference. When I've been able to be successful in student affairs, I never once asked anybody permission. I'd be at work somewhere and I would see something that would need to be done, a situation and opportunity to help students be more successful, to help make the community more inclusive, whatever it was, and nobody else seemed to be really involved in it. And I thought, well, let me just dive in and start to see what I can make happen. And so I did.

And that usually turned out pretty well. And, and my theory was always, well until somebody stops me or yells at me or whatever, I'm just going to keep going. More often than not, what I found out was once people realized oh, hey, wait, something's happening over there, and by that time I would already be able to say, well, yes, some stuff happening and here's some really cool results of what's happening.

You know, people love joining onto a winner. They love signing onto a success story. And so then you think they invented the thing, but that was fine with me because, you know, I was just interested in what the outcomes were. I didn't really need the big handshake or whatever. So yeah, never asked permission, just go for it. And sort of wait till either somebody tells you to stop or until somebody notices and it's like yeah let me help you with that, you know, and they're like great come on in, the water's fine.

Stuart Brown: Is there a story behind that?

Dr. George McClellan: Yeah. One of my favorite stories is when I was a graduate assistant at the University of Arizona, I was fortunate enough to be...I actually had two GAs. One was with Dr. Doug Woodard, who was a professor in higher education and my doctor chair and all kinds of cool stuff. But the other was with Sony Taylor who at the time her title was like Vice Chancellor for Campus Life or something like that and literally sat

right outside her door. And Sony was the national chair of NASPA's what was then called the minority undergraduate fellows program is now called NUFF. So anyway, at the time, Doug had actually started it when he was NASPA President and at the time it was really designed to bring in black folks and other, the term wouldn't have been used in those days, people of color into the student affairs field and it had run that way for a while. It was really focused on racially minority-ized students, but I'm like why not people with disabilities and why not LGBTQ. people and why not international students and why not all kinds of other folks, right, who had been again, words that we would use now who, had minority-ized identities who maybe didn't always find the easiest and most welcoming pathways into higher ed and student affairs. So I was the G A. who was the work behind the title. So the applications were coming into me and I didn't ever ask anybody whether it would be okay to expand the definition of the program.

I just started accepting applications and I accepted the first international student into the program that I know of. And I accepted the first openly LGBTQ applicant to the program that I know of. And, again, I just started accepting apps from all kinds of folks. And then somebody noticed and they're like, did we change the program? And I'm like, well, yeah, nobody said you couldn't. And the students were doing great and they were having terrific experiences and it was being well received in NASPA and across different student affairs divisions. When I left the position, NASPA actually gave me my first little, you know, you get these little polyurethane, thank you black things. That was my first little souvenir keepsake was NASPA actually gave me an award for the work I did around NUFF, which I never really got permission to do.

Stuart Brown: It's a great concept. But I think you also have to maybe understand boundaries a little before you, let's say just dive right in and say, hey, I'm going to do this.

Dr. George McClellan: I was keeping in the spirit of it as far as I was concerned. The program was about increasing inclusion and I figure as long as I stay in that channel, I'm okay. And it was a risk I was willing to take. And I realized that's always part of everybody's calculus, right? But for me, I'm, I'm single and I'm like, okay, you know what's the worst thing is gonna happen? They're gonna tell me to go away, that's fine. I'll go somewhere else and start. And I realized that, you know, not everybody has that sort of freedom. And so, you know, I'm not encouraging anybody to take risks they can't live with. But I wasn't switching it all up. I was just helping it stretch a little bit.

Stuart Brown: Let's think of some of the listeners that tune into the One Thing, maybe grad students, new professionals, mid level, even VPs of student affairs and they're thinking, wow, if George can do that and how successful he's been, I'm going to do that. I'm just gonna do things without permission. So when I was talking before about understanding boundaries, maybe not so much with the MUFF program, but in today's world, is that something that you should have that initiative, but also check on things before you maybe dive full in.

Dr. George McClellan: Again, I'm going to say as long as you're in the spirit of the thing and you're coming with a good heart and you're being ethical. I mean, no laws were broken. I expanded the definition of the program within the spirit of the definition of the program. I think you've got to figure out where your power is and my power in that story was first of all, I'm the person with the knowledge, I'm the one doing the work. And second of all, I have the power of the motive, the sort of ethical purity of the thing. I mean, really, that's all I was worried about. I just figured nobody was paying attention. I was in the spirit of the thing, Let's go.

And throughout my career, like there was a point at which I sort of started working with graduate and professional students. And at the time, folks in higher ed didn't pay a lot of attention to graduate and professional students. We said we were student affairs and the sort of unspoken word in that was undergraduate students. Well, I just started creating stuff for graduate and professional students and inviting them to programs and I figured they're students, they deserve support and attention too. And by the time anybody sort of figured out what was going on, we had all sorts of success stories with grad and professional students at Northwestern, then all of a sudden everybody wanted to be a part of it. And that's okay with me too.

So anyway, that's my thing. If I'm going to say one thing, it's don't ask permission just if you know that you're in a good space and that you're doing things ethically and in the right spirit of helping students and nobody else seems to be. You know, it's not like I took anything from anybody, it's not like I shut anybody out of anything. I'm just like, okay, I'm gonna step into that and do some work.

Stuart Brown: I've been speaking with Dr George McClellan, who is a full professor at the University of Mississippi, former Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs at the Indiana University Purdue University and VP of Student Development at Dickinson, State University. For grad students and new professionals, you have probably come across George. He is the author of numerous books on higher education.

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 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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