



Podcast: Student Affairs One Thing

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Summary: We chat with Dr. Susan Komives. She is professor emerita from the student affairs graduate program at the University of Maryland, College Park

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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 shape your professional career? I'm your host Stuart Brown, the developer of StudentAffairs.com. One of the most accessed websites by student affairs professionals. On our pages we have the most cost effective job postings, listing hundreds of open student services positions and a wide range of webinars.

On today's episode, I am very pleased to have Dr. Susan Komives. This is Susan's 54th year in student affairs work. She is professor emeritus from the University Student Affairs grad program at the University of Maryland, where she taught for 25 years. After 18 years in student affairs practice, including being Vice President of Student Affairs at two separate institutions. She is past president of both ACPA and CAS. She has published 16 books and is the recipient of the lifetime achievement awards from ALE, ACPA, NASPA and last October from the International Leadership Association. Susan Welcome to the program.

Dr. Susan Komives: Thanks Stu. It's really terrific to be with you. I've enjoyed your work over all these years.

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

Dr. Susan Komives: Well after 54 years of doing things things, I have a lot of them, but I think the one that I would like to talk about is the importance of creating community. Everywhere you go in your work. Everywhere you go is an opportunity to bring people together in healthy relationships trying to accomplish very difficult work and we depend on those relationships to do that. Back in the early 90's, we got a group of leadership educators together to look at how do we need to rethink leadership development for college students? And one of the things they tackled was the definition of community at that point. If you said community, you think of a country club or where people are so much the same. There's not room for the challenge of diversity and inclusion. And so the definition they came up with that I've liked ever since then, is that community is the binding together of diverse individuals, committed to adjust common good through shared experiences in a spirit of caring and social responsibility. So how do we come together in all of our diversity to do something really wonderful and transformative. And it brings to me related concepts like a sense of belonging. We talk about sense of belonging a lot about students, but we need that at work too. We need a sense of belonging with our institutions and offices, the people we work with.

And then I think of my colleague Nancy Schlossberg's work on mattering and marginality. You know, everyone wants to matter. you want to know that you matter to somebody or something about the enterprise and not be marginal to it. The idea of relationships being so important. I have always thought of the quantum approach to looking at our world has had a lot of merit and relationships are the organizing principle of the universe in a quantum approach. Saying that everything is interconnected, everything is interdependent and we need to look at our human systems and humans that we relate to that way too, that we're all connected. Back at the turn of this century, my friends, Kathy Allen and Cynthia Cherrey, terrific people with student affairs backgrounds, wrote a book called Systemic Leadership and in this they said relationships are the connected tissue of organizations. And relationships built on integrity are the glue that holds organizations together. We need those kinds of relationships to have the kind of communities that can tackle difficult problems and issues with each other and matter in them and feel a sense of belonging to them. And I think community is the metaphor for that kind of interdependence. Think of every place we go where we are. Your campus is a community. Departments is a community. Your office is a community. Classrooms are communities. Each committee we go to is a community. Even your family is a community. Every zoom screen with all the Partridge family boxes could be seen as a community. So it's a place. Community is a place, but community to me is more than that. It's a spirit. It's a lens through which we look at all of our relationships and as I said, healthy

relationships, I think, build healthy community. So in a Zen like way when we feel in community with other people, we have a heightened sense of responsibility for them and they for the rest of us in that community. So being in community makes everything be more effective and caring and inclusive and empowering.

Stuart Brown: When was the first time that community really came to the fore? Was it going back to that meeting you were talking about with colleagues in the early 1990's?. So when did community become so crucial for you?

Dr. Susan Komives: I do remember, early on, professionally, early in my grad school days, we had a cohort approach in our master's degree program with Mel Hardee, who was just a marvelous mentor and role model for us, but having a cohort. I have not had that. I've been at a large university in math classes which weren't very interactive anyway - Math and Chemistry for my undergrad disciplines - and you didn't hardly know anybody in those courses, but in this cohort model approach, we got to know each other. The nature of the curriculum brought a depth to our relationships. We supported each other. We had each other's backs. We looked out for somebody if they were not in class that day and everybody wondered were they okay? Or we knew ahead of time they were going to be missing because they didn't think to tell you, so you wouldn't worry about them. So I think I got pretty aware of a good cohort model, particularly in grad education, which is what I did almost all of my career. That community feeling in a grad program could make a huge difference in the belonging and sense of commitment to it that those people had. I then started seeing that probably every place I went and I had early career routes in res life and at that point in residents life, we were starting to use the the concepts of community building and how floors could be intentional communities and the importance of a sense of community for students. So residence life wasn't dormitories. It was indeed residences in that broad community kind of language. So it started being in that language.

I think probably the best example I can think of, where I was very proud of the community we intentionally built, was when I was the VP at Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri. It was a women's institution and relationships were highly valued. I mean that was a value of the whole institution, but we were struggling and at one point we had about 15 professional staff in student affairs, not very many, you know, like a lot of one person multi function offices where one person did all kinds of things like small colleges are, but we had to cut. We were, we needed to cut five positions out of a 15 person staff. That's a third and a lot of that might mean functions would need to go, you know, that was very, very scary. But we had worked very hard to build, I don't want to say it was hard work, we had intentionally worked to build a community of professionals at all levels in the same sense of responsibility for the institution and for our student affairs work. Student development work at that institution, clearly women's development, this was in the eighties, so it's very important that we were doing things to empower women and women students and ourselves and so the, you know, we got the whole staff together to tell them we're going to need to do this and said we need to then come back together with an idea of which of our functions for our students really need to continue, which could be done differently, which could students do for themselves. The student government took them on, I mean, how are we going to manage still doing the things that are essential and important? And in the period of time between us talking about the need, we had to do this and our care for each other and I said, we'll do everything we can not to have to eliminate people. Let's realign jobs and work and see how we can manage this. We got to that second meeting and people stepped right up and, for example, I'll never forget this, we were in tears. Two young women said I was gonna go, we were gonna go, back separately, they said this, we're gonna go back and get grad degrees this next year and hadn't applied yet. But I'm gonna do that. Count on me, me being gone because I will get a graduate degree and my positions then can be used in this mixture to redesign work. So two said that and another one said I was going to be looking at another job this year, I've been here four years, it was time for me to move on in my career. And then I had two people who said I was going to retire in another year or two, this is a good year to retire that way. Others of you can keep in your work and I can retire early and had five, literally five, people stepped up to say I can make my life work and go on and support this community and the work that we're doing together. And that was probably, out of a terrible situation, draconian budget cuts hitting us, turned out to be one of the most binding relational positive experiences I probably have ever had. to see people step up to support each other in that way. And then we proceeded with post it notes to put all the essential elements of our work up on newsprint, realign things, create new roles.

There's a whole lot of work that could be shifted around among how we clustered ourselves and that for me was a transcendent experience of being in community and doing individual things to support and promote that.

Stuart Brown: When you talk about community in today's world, especially coming out of the pandemic and people being so isolated, that community is even more important than maybe it was even just 5, 10 years ago.

Dr. Susan Komives: Oh absolutely. And I don't think we know yet what all the implications are going to be of people not having each other for 2.5 years or some portion of that. How is community different? For one thing, I am actually and now a believer in things like this. I always did Facetime and Skype - I don't know what happened to Skype, it kind of disappeared. I've been on lots of Zooms and lots of international meetings now on Zoom and, boy, the way it can bring people together in community and I realized, particularly if already know each other, it works. All the people I've been engaged with, I either knew or we have some sense of what we're doing, like attending a conference, you know, on Zoom, but I don't know about people who haven't yet formed community or are new in their work and we have to watch that carefully.

Stuart Brown: You're right. I think when you're looking at opportunities, especially international across the country, where you can't get people together, well now with Zoom, it doesn't matter, you could just have everyone pop right in. But I think one of the things for student affairs and really higher ed is we're moving towards a, let's say, a hybrid model. So you're working remote, you're working in person and I know a lot of people say, well you don't really get that fluidity at the office because who's there that day or there might not be that many people. So there are people, but is it a real community of people and I think that's what is going to be occurring and people are going to be trying to figure out over the next couple of years.

Dr. Susan Komives: Well, I think you can and people have done it and there's a lot of lessons to look to in the literature. I mean the business world always had concepts of a common day when people would be there because it would be staff meetings and it would be when committees would meet and you would know that you're going to see each other in those days. But I have to say after 25 years of faculty life where I worked at home one or even two days a week and we were certainly empowered to and allowed to as faculty because if you didn't write at home, you wouldn't get any writing done in your office and not much research unless you had a lab or something. But the only place to do that kind of work would be at home. I was, as an extrovert, I was worried about it. I felt so isolated and then email happened and then in 1995 the internet happened and I felt very connected to people. So I could read my emails and go back to my writing and go back to my emails and connect with people and have Facetime meetings or Skype meetings as that technology evolved. So I actually think you can make it work if you feel like you're being in community with others when you do it and that's one of your goals. Several of my faculty friends and I've talked about they've been doing all their advising and all their dissertation advising anyway by these mechanisms and the students feel just as cared for. So I mean the relationships can happen, I do think the sense of community still needs to be there and that to me means some face to face experience.

Stuart Brown: I'm going to agree and disagree with you on that. I think from a more practitioner, it's harder to have the remote and the in person or maybe skew more towards the remote. I've just found that working with colleagues, for example, you can have a day here a day there, everyone's together. But what I missed when it was the tail end of the pandemic is you have an idea you want to talk to someone and I could just get up and walk to the office next door, walk down the hall and talk to people, figure things out, You can't do that on Zoom or email or a phone. It's just not the same thing and that's what really hurt my productivity and that's what I've seen with the, let's call the, day to day practitioners. So faculty, I could see a little difference, but again, I don't know what is going to be happening in the next couple of years. I think community though is the key ingredient that you need to have or it just doesn't work.

Dr. Susan Komives: Well, I think humans want to feel a sense of belonging. Humans want to feel like they matter. And I think that can play out differently by types of jobs. I think it can play out differently by personality types. You know, an extrovert is going to feel more lost probably than an introvert might by some of the lack of face to face interaction, but everybody wants something within their own sphere. So figuring that out, making it work. I do think, though, that technology marching on so fast means that we've all got to figure out new ways of meeting some of those same human needs as technology gives us opportunities. And I mean, I remember when email first came in, there were faculty in my department, older faculty who said I will never want to read, don't send me an email, write me a memo, put it on my desk. I couldn't imagine adjusting to a new technology and they realized they would be dinosaurs fairly quickly if they didn't somehow learn to manage that technology. And then I realized how email actually, for me, brought people closer into my world. I could get emails from someone who otherwise I would trade phone calls with for four days before we found the time we

could even talk on the phone and that was a waste of our time to try to find the time to talk. Or I used to have to have those pads of blocks of the time and you send them out to your whole new committee to say, tell me the times you could meet for an hour and I'll find a common time and now you do that with a doodle poll. So there are things that facilitate community building that are much better for us than the older systems we had. And we need to keep the same human value going even if the technologies change the delivery and find the ones that make it better.

Stuart Brown: Susan, I want to thank you for sharing your one thing. We could probably talk about this for a very long time.

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 want to thank today's guest Dr. Susan Komives. 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.

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