



Podcast: Student Affairs One Thing

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Summary: We chat with Dr. Elizabeth True, Vice President of Student Affairs at Eastern Maine Community College.

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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, developer of studentaffairs.com, one of the most accessed websites by student affairs professionals. On our website we have the most cost effective job posting board, listing hundreds of open student services positions and a wide range of webinars. On today's episode. I am very pleased to have Dr. Elizabeth True, Vice President of Student Affairs at Eastern Maine Community College. Welcome to the program.

Dr. Elizabeth True: Thank you It's great to be here.

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

Dr. Elizabeth True: My one thing that has guided my work is that students rise to our expectations. My go-to student development theory has always been Sanford's challenge and support ratio. I believe our role is to create the where students can explore and learn the most possible in and out of the classroom. This involves learning as much as possible about our students to understand where they are and where they can grow. If we set the bar too high, they inevitably fail too, low and they grow bored and turn to something. I've worked at a wide variety of institutions from an Ivy League to a maritime academy to my current position at a community college.

Understandably these different student populations arrived at very different developmental stages. And of course, the pandemic has set them back academically and socially. But there's still that common thread of they rise to our expectations. We just have to be careful where we set that bar.

Stuart Brown: Is there a story about why that is your one thing?

Dr. Elizabeth True: Well, I think the, the example that's really unusual because of my work at the Maritime Academy is we had a great tradition. It's called the ship jump. It's not only a tradition, but it's also an official requirement to gain and train for a coast guard license to be a ship third mate or engineer. You have to be able to jump off the deck of the very tall training ship fully clothed into the freezing Atlantic ocean 25 ft below. And that is because they need to know how to evacuate in case of an emergency when they are at sea. It's a perfect example of challenge and support. We don't just push them off with no preparation. The students have to prep classes in the pool on campus and they learn how to position themselves to prevent painful belly flops and to prevent other injuries. On the day of ship jump, there are divers and rescue boat in the water to help anyone in distress. The President of the Academy actually is the first one off to demonstrate how it's done and also to set that example. There's always that one student who stands petrified at the platform for five minutes, gathering their courage as the crowd of other students and parents and faculty and staff begin to cheer encouragement. The diving instructor often gives a gentle nudge and every student eventually makes the plunge. But the grins on their faces when they emerged shivering from the water, soaked in there fully clothed is evidence of how proud they are that they accomplished something that seemed originally so daunting.

Stuart Brown: We spoke before we started taping and you have actually another story that you'd like to share about the about your one thing.

Dr. Elizabeth True: Well, when we started talking, I had just seen a post on Facebook about this incident or this, this other example. And it reminded me of again, this one principle of students rise to expectations. When I worked at Mount Ida College, the Student Government Association decided one year that the code of conduct

was really a code of misconduct, what not to do. And they wanted to create a new honor code of respect that reflected the unique values of their learning community.

They worked in endless meetings with the student life, staff and other students to identify those values and wordsmith them. Our staff then suggested they take the code to the faculty senate to gather their feedback and gain their endorsement. Terrified, the SDA leaders presented to the faculty senate and received a ringing endorsement due to their careful preparation and our coaching on public speaking. We created a mug at the time that had it on there and gave that out to everyone. Twenty years later, a colleague posted that mug we had distributed on Facebook. And of course, most of those SGA executive board members are now wonderful members of the community and they all responded with how proud they had been of that moment and how proud we were of them. One student said it was his first experience with adulting.

Stuart Brown: You think sometimes college administrators don't let students rise to meet expectations? That it's sort of while you're in college, you're young, we're going to hand hold you until we feel that you are ready.

Dr. Elizabeth True: I think sometimes that does happen and you know, sometimes you go to the lowest common denominator because it's easiest or it's easier just to do it for them rather than teach them how to do it. I think often, for example, in student activities, we know that a program they're putting together is not going to have a turnout or they haven't done the right preparation or advertised and we know it's going to fail. And we often swoop in and save the day. And I try to work with my staff to only do that when there's a lot of money involved or outside speakers coming in because I think that failing experience is practically more valuable. I just don't think they would have learned if we put it all together for them.

So I do think we have to be careful about rescuing and continuing to, to assess where the bar is and where do we need to raise it. Scaffolding is a term that is used a lot in education and that's making sure that the bar we have said is pretty high that we, we build the ladders to get them there. And so that may be giving them some skills or coaching them along the way.

Stuart Brown: Have you had students over the years that really grasp this concept and say, wow, look at what they're giving me. I'm going to really take their expectations and go to town with it.

Dr. Elizabeth True: I've seen that with student government. I've seen them particularly with programming boards, with student activities. I've seen it with senior RAs who I'm amazed they frankly can take on and do better work than some seasoned professionals with the right coaching and expectations. And it's so exciting to see. I often then try to recruit them all to go into our field. Sometimes that works. Sometimes it doesn't. But I think you can see that and just the pleasure on their face when they're given that autonomy and that responsibility is pretty exciting to watch. It's student development unfolding before our eyes.

Stuart Brown: You think some of the other players are on campus, primary, the faculty see this and let their students do this?

Dr. Elizabeth True: I see examples of it happening with faculty a lot. I see them giving research assignments and teaching assignments and I particularly have seen it with senior symposiums and seminars or poster projects where students work in groups and really through the coaching and scaffold from their faculty produce graduate level work and it's so exciting to watch. And I particularly see that with faculty that are willing to think out of the box and are just dedicated to student learning because it's a lot more work, obviously, but that's what we're here for. You know, obviously, some faculty are not comfortable with doing that and, and it doesn't always work in the large, you know, lecture forums, but particularly in upper level courses or graduate courses, quality of work, sometimes I've seen as an instructor with what my students put together is just incredible and it's fun to watch.

Stuart Brown: I think if the grad students, new professionals, mid level professionals listening to this episode, it's something to really take to heart. Because especially when you're young, you don't want a program to fail. You don't want students to fail and you want to have the light shine on you brightly as opposed to, oh no, I was in charge of this program and it didn't do well. So I think sometimes it's a balancing act for staff of letting students take the reins but also if there's a major program, you don't want to necessarily fail.

Dr. Elizabeth True: And that's something I often talk about with my young staff and my new staff that how do we do that balance and reminding all of them that somebody let them have some autonomy and run with a project once and that's why they're here today. And that they need to help do that. But again, like the ship jump, it isn't just throwing them out into the water. It is giving them some preparation and having a few things around to support them. But ultimately, they are doing it on their own and how rewarding that is to watch that development happening right in front of us,

Stuart Brown: Liz. I want to thank you for sharing your one thing. I think this is so important and it is hard to do because you always want to dive into that water and save the person and, and it's difficult to sort of step back and to let students try maybe fail, succeed. And that is such a great learning process, especially if you are at a campus that you can see the students grow over a couple of years.

Dr. Elizabeth True: Absolutely. It is our most rewarding work. It does take more time. It's just like delegating with new staff. In the long run, yes, it may be faster for you to do it yourself. But what are we here for? We're here to help our students grow.

Stuart Brown: 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 my guest today, Dr. Elizabeth True, Vice President of Student Affairs at Eastern Maine Community College.

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'll join us next time for another episode.

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