Throwing Caution to the Wind: Saying yes, even when you think you aren’t ready

Thank you for inviting me to be a part of your meeting this week. I have learned a lot, reconnected with long-time friends, made some new ones and been continually amazed at your unrelenting dedication to student success. The more we can keep our purpose, our students, in the forefront of our minds the better work we do. I’m going to close today by focusing on your development and the development of your organization. As you heard the opening speaker talk about, what you bring to work each day – especially if you manage people – makes a difference in the work people are willing and able to accomplish.

When Jennifer asked me to be your closing speaker, I was honored but as an introvert who plays an extrovert most of her waking hours, it was a bit intimidating. I can be quick on my feet if needed, but a sustained motivational speech isn’t really my forte. Give me a chance to talk about FERPA ad nauseum, now I’m your girl. But when Jennifer mentioned that you all would like me to speak about professional development and succession planning, I knew I had something to share because I have been living both of these for the past 10 years.
As I just mentioned my office has been actively working on succession planning for about 10 years and we have focused a great deal of energy and finances on staff development, so I am happy to share our journey. But I am going to put a bit of a twist on this topic. Over the past several years I have seen some very powerful leaders progress within organizations only to crash and burn a little while later. Although not universally true, one fairly common element between these individuals is an apparent desire to get ahead at any cost. This ‘get ahead regardless of who it impacts mentality’ seems beneficial in the short run, but it comes at the expense of the individual’s overall development and the institution’s greater good. These instances have me increasingly convinced that the professional development devoid of character development is broken. The two should be intertwined and one shouldn’t be sacrificed for the other.

One of my favorite bands, much to my husband’s chagrin, is the Velvet Underground. Yes, Lou Reed was a bit of an oddball and wrote some quirky songs but many of them are very moving and have deep meaning. My favorite Velvet Underground song is “I’ll be your mirror”. The main line of the song is “I’ll be your mirror, reflect what you are in case you don’t know.” I love this song for its profound simplicity but tremendous depth. Clearly it’s about people but as I consider professional development and
advancement, I am struck by the reality that what we choose to do and how we choose to do it are a mirror of who we are. Do you try to get ahead at any cost? Are you willing to sacrifice others to get what you want? Is one of your first thoughts, how will this move or this action impact those around me before proceeding or is it how does this advance me? Are you truly being a servant leader or just going through the motions since it looks better? The answers to these questions reflect our character. The process and the results really do reflect who we are.

This is not intended to be a moral judgment on the means by which we go about professional advancement, but rather my hope is that you will take away from my talk today that professional development and personal, character development are inextricably intertwined processes that are optimized when thought of and worked on in tandem. My wish for you is that you will want to focus on continually developing your professional self and the core character of yourself, and will encourage those around you to do so too.

The title of my talk may also seem a bit of a stretch to some of you as I talk about striking a balance of professional advancement and character development, and how that all fits in with succession planning. Again, these two are not mutually exclusive, we need to say yes
to both even if we aren’t quite ready to do so. We often only think of saying yes to new career or job responsibilities that will further position us to take the next step. Saying yes to acting a different way, approaching a problem in new way, practicing listening more acutely, being more humble or simply or learning to think first of others and the impact of our decisions on them is also throwing caution to the wind. This is often not what is rewarded or praised in our current work world, so going against the stream is throwing caution to the wind. It might be scary, you may feel out of your depth, you may not be good at things when you start but the key is to take that first step. As one of my mentors says to me repeatedly, “don’t get sucked into the quagmire of the negative; little victories are still victories.”

Author David Brooks has recently published a book called The Road to Character. In this book he explores what he calls resume virtues and eulogy virtues. To quote him:

“The resume virtues are the ones you list on your resume, the skills that you bring to the job market and that contribute to external success. The eulogy virtues are deeper. They’re the virtues that get talked about at your funeral, the ones that exist at the core of your being - whether you are kind, brave, honest or faithful; what kind of relationships you formed.”
Most of us would say that the eulogy virtues are more important than the resume virtues, but I confess for long stretches of my life I’ve spent more time thinking about the latter than the former. Our education system is certainly oriented around the resume virtues more than the eulogy ones. Public conversation, too - the self-help tips in magazines, the nonfiction best sellers. Most of us have clearer strategies for how to achieve career success than we do for how we develop a profound character.”

I think it’s possible to create strategies for both, it’s often more difficult than just focusing on growing professionally but we can learn about and grow our character too, which will have a profound impact on the workplace.

Sometimes eulogy virtues are also referred to as soft skills or as Daniel Goleman coined it having ‘emotional intelligence.’ Soft skills does not mean weak, unmotivated, or passive rather it means either an innate or developed ability to tap into understanding how your own feelings can inform and direct your interactions with others, thinking before acting, and working to identify with the needs of others around you. In short, intentionally working to be in community with those whom you direct and serve. These,
to me, especially in a professional setting are our character development or eulogy virtues.

I am a cautious person by nature. I drive the speed limit, much to the frustration of those around me and sometimes those in my car. I stop at stop signs when riding my bike. I actually read much if not all of the terms and conditions for software, hotel rooms, credit cards, etc. before signing them. I make lists for what I am going to accomplish on the weekend, including a rough timeline of when I need to get up and be to the various locations to minimize wasted time. I practice any presentation I do several times, even when I know the content like the back of my hand.

I tell you this not to make you think, “wow, I’m glad I’m not that way” but to underscore how differently I approach professional and personal development. I have found there is no right time to embark on growing and developing professionally or personally. There is always one more thing to do, to learn, to finish, to accomplish, to read, to practice before jumping in. If I waited until I was completely sure and completely ready I would never take the leap.

We all wear different professional hats and some of these hats fit better than others. For my regular day job I wear the following hats: FERPA queen (really, that one is a
crown), policy wonk, communications director, student athlete academic eligibility coordinator, student degree progress facilitator, degree audit wrangler, organizational effectiveness conductor, and director of training and system support. About five months ago I was asked to serve as the interim director of the Office of Student Finance for the University of Minnesota. I would not characterize my knowledge of Financial Aid as vast but I did have a compliance background and knew my services were needed.

After I agreed to serve in this capacity, I was informed that this is one of two positions on campus where the person holding the role can be sent to prison, the other is the President. Needless to say, this was an entirely different type, style, and size of hat than I have ever worn before. When I discussed this opportunity with my husband, his first reaction was “why would you want to do this, you love your job.” And he is right, I do. I am a total FERPA nerd, policy work is like slowly putting together a puzzle - sometimes with a piece missing, NCAA academic rules and regulations are fascinating to me, and being able to focus on organizational effectiveness allows our organization to grow and thrive. I responded with something akin to the following: “This is what our organization needs, this unit has had a history of some
At this juncture, I think it’s important to have you understand a bit more about the office where I work. I work in a department at the University of Minnesota called Academic Support Resources. The office has just over 200 full-time staff. Many of them are long-time employees who predate our merger. We are somewhat unique in that our department is comprised of: the Office of the Registrar, the Office of Student Finance, One Stop Student Services, the Office of Classroom Management, a fully-fledged Information Technology unit, and my area called Continuity and Compliance. The University intentionally forged these units together, believing that the purposefully collective and integrated work of the subunits would result in better service to our students, faculty and staff knowing that working individually we only see a limited part of the picture. Some of our staff embraced this merger, others didn’t and this was obvious as we embarked on our succession planning efforts. I share this to underscore that these efforts can still have an impact and help the organization grow even if you work in a department that isn’t one big happy family.
they need someone who can not only keep the lights on but help them think about how their work is stronger when they are part of the whole and not done in isolation. I think I can do that. This may be one of the biggest mistakes I make in my professional career (because what if my boss realizes that she doesn’t need me in my old job or my associate director who is filling in for me does it better than I did or I colossally mess things up in financial aid), but if I can help the staff in OSF move forward, believe in the value of working together and supporting each others’ work, and help them see there is strength in collaboration it’s worth the risk.”

So, I said yes. I have no financial aid background, I am not a CPA nor do I hold an MBA, but I do play well with others, have an eye for compliance and strive with my whole being to build community.

If I hadn’t practiced saying yes, despite not being ready many times before - some big, some small - I never would have agreed to do this. If you aren’t used to saying yes, I suggest starting small. If asked to join an IACRAO committee, do a presentation, or write for the IACRAO newsletter say yes. There will be people who can and will help you. I’ll ask you now, please consider joining an AACRAO committee or submitting something for an upcoming meeting.
So now that you are ready to say yes and are in the professional development frame of mind, how do you start? Very basically, from an organizational development perspective the first step in professional development is to devise for yourself an “Individual Development Plan” or IDP. The tool is used to help translate global goals into discrete action steps. Typically, IDPs include three types of goals: enhancing a skill where there are current strengths; developing a new skill area; or acquiring new skills. Once you have identified your goals, you need to identify strategies for achieving those goals. What might you need to do to achieve those goals? As I’m sure you’ve heard goals should be SMART – specific, measurable, achievable, results-focused and time-bound. Making SMART goals helps you be realistic and keeps you on target. After you have identified strategies, you then can outline the action steps to reach the goal. I challenge you as you think about professional goals to think broadly about the eulogy virtues too. These can and should be interwoven with professional skill strength and development.

So let’s say you want to become a more competent writer, there are lots of different ways you could go about achieving that. You could take classes on campus, through a literary center or just pick up a book
on writing and read it. One thing that that many great writers have in common though is anti-writing - listening. They listen carefully to those around them with their whole attention because they never know where the next ah-ha moment will come from, and it shows respect to those around them. Being a good, honest listener is a challenge in our world of immediate connection and competing demands. But by focusing on that one skill the person is building a stronger foundation.

If you look at the visual displayed, by focusing on the roots, where the individuals are, you create a strong base and contribute to the overall health of the tree or in our case the overall organization. I’m a gardener, so I like to think of what we are trying to do is adding compost and the appropriate fertilizer to them to help them grow strong and solid.

Some questions to assist you in creating your individual development plan are: Where do you see yourself in a year, five years? What hopes and dreams are you chasing? What strengths would you like to build upon what areas of grown are the most hindering? What skills would you like to develop?

Creating IDPs often requires structure. Without the structure we sometimes put it as a low priority, sort of like
It seems frivolous when compared to the ever growing everyday demands of our work, especially as we are all challenged to do more with less. To this end, we require each of our staff (including all our management and director-level staff) to complete and IDP worksheet annually at performance review time. It’s not tied to the performance review, but fits nicely with the idea of professional goal setting that is part of the performance appraisal. Some staff do it begrudgingly (normally accompanied with the statement of I don’t want to grow any more or I just want to have a job and you want me to have a career or I’m too busy to focus on my professional development) others relish the idea. We tell them not doing one isn’t an option, but we do give them some leeway as to what goes on it. This process provides an excellent opportunity for the supervisor and the staff member to talk about goals, do some strategizing, talk through potential issues, and have a meaningful conversation about professional growth.

I have two very different stories I’d like to share about how two of my staff approached individual development work. One of them is very linear and structured and needs to know the priorities of her work, even though she should be setting them herself. She is not a ‘saying yes’ person, but she is still growing professionally. One of the professional
goals that I had identified for her, as I believe part of being a manager is to encourage your staff to grow, was to give presentations. She is terrified of doing this and started to cry when I talked about it. I told her we could start small...present at meetings, lead a meeting, etc. She did those this last year and did them well. So I was surprised when I asked her what she wanted to do for professional development this year, and she said ‘define what you mean by professional development’ - so I gave my typical response - enhance a strength, build some capacity in an area where you may not have a strength, learn something new, stretch yourself. She said, ‘I’m proposing we play four-square.’ Needless to say I looked at her quizzically. And here my words in past reviews came roaring back at me. She said “we talk about wanting work-life balance, that taking breaks is important, that since we all do such different work it’s often a challenge to get to know our colleagues and what they struggle with, and that others in the office think I am difficult to approach - what better way to tackle all of these than to play together one day a week over lunch? Even if it’s just for fun we inevitably start to talk about work, what we are struggling with, new ideas so this would be a great way to learn about each other.’ I couldn’t fault her logic. She is working on both professional development and personal development by not only understanding more about how the office functions and expanding her work horizon but also by
trying to become a more accessible and compassionate colleague.

A second member of my staff identified a couple of years ago that she wanted to move up within the organization. She also identified that in order to do so she would need to develop her self-confidence and her resilience when things got rough. There were lots of different avenues she could have pursued to develop these skills but she chose a very improbable and fairly non-conventional method. She signed up for improv classes with a local improv troupe. Yes, I said improv.

These classes required each participant to do real improv in front of a paying audience with other classmates (after the taught them some tricks of the trade). If you’ve ever seen improv you know that the other actors on stage with you are just as important as you are, are unpredictable, and are depending on each other to keep the sketch going. Being a lone wolf, only out for yourself and grabbing the audience laugh, kills the whole concept.

Her transformation has been nothing short of spectacular. She was never timid per se, but she now approaches challenging situations and people with a different air about her. She also uses some of her improv techniques to guide the processes of conversation. Specifically there is a
tactic in improv that changes the very easy to say ‘yes but’ to ‘yes and’ - the idea being you say ‘yes’ and then use the ‘and’ to help reframe the conversation. For example, we have some faculty who despise our new class search functionality in our SIS, instead of arguing with them about this her response is ‘yes, and the fact that this is now vanilla instead of modified, allows us as an institution to take advantage of some critical functionality we have not been able to use in the past. Which will improve the student experience and teaching and learning.’

Her colleagues saw a difference too and she has been asked to train the Enrollment Services staff at a major university near us, and will be doing a pre-conference workshop at AACRAO in Phoenix.

If you are planning/hoping to stay in the registrar and admissions or enrollment management worlds and don’t know where to even start thinking about what knowledge or skills you need to move up or around, I would recommend you peruse the “Report of the AACRAO Professional Competencies and Proficiencies Working Group.” This group worked for nearly two years to identify, hone, and solidify the core professional competencies for our profession. As I mentioned earlier, knowing what you need or want to develop is a great first step.
It would be just plain wrong if I came to your meeting as the AACRAO Board representative and didn’t talk for a few minutes about AACRAO and the importance of a strong professional network. My journey of saying yes, despite not feeling as though I was ready started when I joined a Professional Activities Committee. I still remember our first committee meeting at the Annual meeting in DC, it was at 7 am before the conference started and the committee chair whom I had met the previous fall at a Big 10 meeting said to me, “I’m leaving Ohio State to go to Oklahoma, I can’t chair the committee any longer. Will you do it?” My first thought was, “No, I don’t even know what these committees do since I’ve now been part of one for about 10 minutes. And then my second thought was, it’s not rocket science if I screw it up they just won’t ask me to do it again and no one will die.” So, I said yes. That led to me chairing the committee for a couple of years, learning what I was supposed to do and fulfilling the duties, meeting lots of other people, and then I was asked to fill in for the last year and a half for a member of the program committee who needed to step down due to her commitments on campus for implementing a new SIS. Again, I had no idea what it entailed but I still said yes. That led to me being the program chair. And, I think all of those combined ultimately culminated in me being selected for the Board of Directors. The take-away from this vignette is to utilize
opportunities as they present themselves, you never know where they will land you. It is likely that you will never feel quite ready, but you need to remember you won’t be doing this alone.

One skill I have learned to depend heavily upon is how to respectfully “invite myself to the table.” Don’t wait to be asked. If in articulating your goals you identified an area of the institution or a process you want to become more skilled at or understand better, reach out to that area and ask how you might participate.

Here is an example of me inviting myself to the table. About eight years ago, when AACRAO was re-writing the FERPA guide I really wanted to help. I had only been in the profession about 6 years but had developed a strong understanding of FERPA and its application and had some ideas that I thought would make the FERPA guide more useful to our membership. I kept waiting for the call for volunteers to help with the re-write, but it never came. I had previously submitted my name for a few AACRAO committees, and hadn’t been selected so I knew this was a long shot too. At the annual meeting the names were announced as to who was going to be on the re-write tea. It was five of the same people who had been involved in the editing and re-writing in the past, and they were all men. I contacted one of the team and asked why there were only men working on the guide and if it would be at
all possible for me to help in any way. Shortly thereafter I was asked to join the team working on the re-write.

So, I’ve spent a fair amount of time talking about professional development and personal/character development and now I want to tie it to the concept of succession planning. Succession planning in a nutshell is “a process for identifying and developing internal people with the potential to fill key business leadership positions in the company. Succession planning increases the availability of experienced and capable employees that are prepared to assume these roles as they become available. Taken narrowly, "replacement planning" for key roles is the heart of succession planning. Effective succession or talent-pool management concerns itself with building a series of feeder groups up and down the entire leadership pipeline or progression (Charan, Drotter, Noel, 2001). In contrast, replacement planning is focused narrowly on identifying specific back-up candidates for given senior management positions. For the most part position-driven replacement planning (often referred to as the "truck scenario") is a forecast, which research indicates does not have substantial impact on outcomes.” Thank you wikipedia. In everyday language, it is a structured process to build capacity in an organization to provide continuity and maintain organizational strength.
As I mentioned, our office has been working on succession planning efforts for about 10 years. It started when we looked across the organization, and it was readily apparent that we had several areas where our ‘bench strength’ was really weak and if we didn’t try to remedy the situation by ‘growing our own’ within the organization we were going to be in trouble. We had (and still have) a few staff who have been with the organization for a very long time, have a great deal of institutional memory, and haven’t readily shared that information. We knew we needed to build some capacity. Additionally, as we looked at our organization, we knew there wasn’t much opportunity to move up so we needed to help our staff develop the skills and acquire the knowledge to be viable candidates for lateral, but different positions. That doesn’t mean they are promised the job, but it does mean that we are committed to supporting and offering opportunities for staff to understand what it requires to move into another position.

When we rolled out the concept of succession planning in our office to say it was met with some skepticism is an understatement. Some people were simply confused, some people had come from work environments where the words ‘succession plan’ were code words for
‘establishing an heir apparent,’ and others simply thought it was another passing fad.

Since we were a newly merged office, we needed to start by defining what we meant and what we didn’t mean – we were not crowning heirs apparent, nor were we guaranteeing that our staff would automatically get any job openings.

We purposely started our succession planning journey by creating our office mission, vision and values. So, answering these question for all of our units – why do we exist? what do we hope to achieve? and how do we strive to act? Do you know your office mission? Or values.

We wanted ours to be short and something staff could memorize. We used a cross-functional team (not all directors or managers) for this process and it was truly iterative; it took about 8 months. This allowed us to create some ownership amongst staff since the mission, vision and values weren’t just handed down from management; it also allowed us to communicate with a common language about what we do and how we act; and helped create guiding principles for making tough decisions - what I mean by that is if we have to choose amongst an array of projects or need to decide where to invest funds, we regularly go back to “which one of these will ‘make a
positive difference in students’ lives’ or is this living up to our values.”

We then examined all the work that occurs in our office, and tried to think about what kind of work we might be doing in the future, and lumped that all together to create career families. From our career families, we derived essential knowledge, skills and abilities for each of the career families. Staff use the identified knowledge, skills and abilities to generate their individual development plan so they can grow in their current position or develop skills necessary to be a viable candidate for another position within the organization.

If you think back to the bonsai tree image, overall organization health is dependent upon helping staff grow and develop as professionals and people. Our eulogy virtues are what we are remembered for - what our staff members project reflects our virtues as an office. The exact words may differ but I think all of us would appreciate a comment reaching our president that reflected something like “The staff member I interacted with treated me with respect, listened to my concerns, showed compassion for my situation and made me feel like I mattered. I still didn’t get what I wanted but left the office knowing I was important.”
I hope I have provided you with a fresh way to think about professional development, its role in long-term organizational health and stability, and that you will go back to your campuses ready to identify professional skills you want to enhance, and eulogy virtues that you want and need to develop. And, that you will instill this desire in those around you too. I further hope you have seen you don’t have to compromise on either area, that they can both be worked on to make you a better professional and a better person. My overall wish for you is that you will want to focus on continually developing your professional self and your core character, and will encourage those around you to do so too.

My six take-aways from this are:

1. Say yes when the opportunity arises, you are probably more prepared than you think.
2. Focus on professional development in concert with character development.
3. Don’t wait to be invited to the table.
4. Think of how you can develop these concepts in others.
5. Live your eulogy virtues.
6. Spend some time pondering, who you want to be professionally and how do you want to get there?
There is no right way to go about doing this, you should do what works for you. There is one important keystone, however, and that’s to write it down. Research shows we are much more likely to achieve our goals if we ‘commit them to paper’ or other paper substitutes.

Thank you for your time, thank you for making me feel at home at your conference and thank you for doing the work you do every day.

Safe travels home and if you are ever at the University of Minnesota, stop by and say hi.