



Podcast: Student Affairs One Thing

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Summary: We chat with W. Houston Dougharty, Vice President for Student Affairs at Hofstra University.

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B E G I N T R A N S C R I P T

Stuart Brown: Welcome 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'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 posting board, listing hundreds of open student services positions and a wide range of webinars. I would like to thank our sponsor Alcohol101+, a cost free digital alcohol education program developed by Responsibility.org. Designed to be used by colleges and universities, the course includes interactive and quick paced programming covering core alcohol education topics. To learn more about Alcohol101+, visit <https://www.alcohol101.plus>.

On today's episode. I am very pleased to have Houston Dougharty, Vice President for Student Affairs at Hofstra University. He was previously the Vice President for Student Affairs at Grinnell College and Dean of Students at Lewis and Clark College. Welcome to the program.

Houston Dougharty: Thank you so much Stuart. I really appreciate the invitation.

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

Houston Dougharty: As I distill heading into my 40th year in higher ed and student affairs, I had lots of ideas and I think what stuck with me best was this notion that the walk is more important than the talk. And by that I mean how we choose as student affairs professionals to walk through the world and to walk through our campuses is critical to our success and positive impact on our students and on our colleagues. I've often said to my colleagues and my staff members that our students learn more from us by watching us than anything we say or anything we write. Yet we spend so much more time crafting our words and less time being intentional about how we are observed, how and where and when our campus communities see us. I think, you know, the longer I do this and the more I've been in touch with students and colleagues at the eight places I've gotten the chance to work at in 40 years, the things they remember are really hardly ever things I planned, hardly ever things that I crafted, but more intentional times that I was present, that I was present in their lives.

You know that I was present in the life of a campus. That classic notion that actions are more powerful than words. You know, we will be known by the good work we do and often that good work is the work that we accomplished by being present. And I know when I became an SSAO almost 20 years ago I had that classic dilemma of, oh no, I'm not gonna be able to spend time with students. You know, now I'm just gonna be behind a desk or in our long meetings and crafting memos and dealing with budgets. And all that's true. You know, you are consumed by those things, but it can be intentionally addressed by determining how we are present. And for most of us it was that notion of presence and being part of the community that got us in this field. So we don't do ourselves a service by cutting ourselves off from being present and from showing the kind of care and compassion that being present allows us to do.

Stuart Brown: Was there some moment during your professional career where that really came to light? That you sort of maybe had this in the back of your mind but there was some incident, some episode at a campus where you said, wow, you know what, this is important.

Houston Dougharty: There are a couple that come to mind to me now. Of course some of those things are mundane. Like I walk my dog through our campus every day and the relationships that I've developed with our plant staff, with our facility staff who know my dog's name more than they know mine. They have an appreciation for student affairs differently because I have a different relationship with them through a pug. So

there are those sort of mundane things, but they're two specific. One with a colleague and one with a student that have been brought back to me recently. One is, I'm right now in the process of stepping down from my position that, you know, at Hofstra leaving Hofstra. I'll be retiring next summer and one of my dear colleagues wrote a note to me when it was announced that I was retiring and she said, I don't know if I've ever mentioned to you that three weeks after I joined your division at my husband's visitation who had recently passed away. I looked up and there you were. And she said, I never imagined that the vice president of my new division would show up at the visitation, the funeral home for my husband. And we, I'm not sure we even did more than exchange a hug at that event. And yet here what, five years later, six years later, the first thing she mentions was that my presence at an important time in her life was critical to her. That's an intentional decision to be present in those moments. But I would hope for those of us in leadership positions and student affairs. It would also be a very natural decision and one that we would prioritize in our lives even if it's on a Saturday morning, 20 or 30 miles away from where we are.

And you know, sadly, the other one that came to mind that I was reminded of recently is when I was a Puget Sound where I was the associate dean and also director of admissions for many years. We had an unfortunate death on campus and I came to the residence hall where that student had passed away and all the residents were out front sort of with a vigil and candles. And I walked up to a student. I knew very well and she put her arm around me and I said, Whitney, I don't really know what to say. And she said, all you have to do is be there. And it just reminded me that even though I was there as a senior student affairs administrator, those students and particularly Whitney, they weren't looking for words, they weren't looking for messages, they were looking for presence and they were looking for comfort and they were looking for signals that we were all part of an important community.

Stuart Brown: I think what you're saying is so important because like you said earlier, when you get to the senior student levels, you are in meetings a lot, you are behind the desk and I think you really need to force yourself to get out there. And it could be something as simple as walking the dog. And I think that's a great idea, probably every senior student affairs person -- get a dog. But because you know it's just a natural magnet, students want to come over, you get to see the campus differently and it doesn't always have to be that intentional part on your daily rounds. But to be out there that students can see you and not that, oh, I think we have a vice president. I've never seen him, but...

Well, and even my assistant and I were very intentional about every week putting 30 minutes in the student center, and I would walk over to the student center and stand in the Starbucks line and I would walk up to the Starbucks and I'd buy the drink of the person behind me and then I'd stop and I chat with them and, you know, four out of five times those were people I hadn't known, but then we're now friends of mine, and again, it's being intentional about it Stuart. It's being consistent and it's being genuine, being authentic about. I'm thrilled to be here.

When the Hofstra Gospel Ensemble at the end of the year invited me to come to their Friday night concert, you know, I had a dinner thing and then I had a later thing, but my wife and I came by and enjoyed about half of the concert and then I got all these follow up emails saying you came like, of course you invited me, right, And it's those sort of simple, intentional and authentic moments of presence that I think not only help us as professionals, stay in touch with why we love this field, but also build community and let our community members know that we care.

Stuart Brown: One of the things, I think that is important -- this is not just for senior student affairs people. These are for even the grad students that are starting off in the field. This is something you need to incorporate into your daily routine and it could be maybe easier, but then once it's sort of, you have that, I like to, let's say, a golf analogy, those mental muscles, that you've been doing it now, maybe for 10 years. It's something that is natural and not forced, but you know, I think that is so critical to get out there.

Houston Dougharty: Yeah, and everybody wins right? The community wins. The individuals we connect with win, but almost most importantly we win because it feeds us, we then go back to that meeting or that budget with a renewed sense of purpose, not to mention the opportunity to, you know, get out of our office and walk a little bit and connect with the people that were there to love and that we're there to support and that we're there to educate.

Stuart Brown: Houston, I want to thank you so much for sharing your One Thing, especially in today's world where we talk virtual, we talk hybrid and it's maybe more important than ever to get out there and have that contact, build those relationships, show people that there is a real person behind that screen.

You have been listening to the Student Affairs One Thing, a podcast that asked a simple question of seasoned student affairs professionals in the field -- what is the one thing you have learned that has helped shape your career? My guest today has been Houston Dougharty, Vice President for Student Affairs at Hofstra University. 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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