



Podcast: Student Affairs One Thing

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Summary: We chat with Dr. Justin Lawhead, Dean of Students at The University of Memphis.

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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 posting board, listing hundreds of open student services positions and a wide range of webinars. I want 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. Through an administrative dashboard, the program contains tools for institutions to easily roster students, track progress and analyze student metrics. To learn more about Alcohol101+ visit <https://www.alcohol101.plus>.

Stuart Brown: On today's episode, I am very pleased to have Dr. Justin Lawhead, Dean of Students at the University of Memphis. Welcome to the program.

Dr. Justin Lawhead: Thank you.

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

Dr. Justin Lawhead: The one thing that I've learned in 30 years of higher education is that change is constant and change is who we are and change is what we do. And so through that change vigils need to be listened to. They need to be appreciated and things need to adapt and so particularly over the last three years, what I've tried to do is shift my management style to make sure that listening is a core identifiable trait, is a core action that I take every day and staff know that when I listen, that that information, that concern, whatever they're conveying to me, is part of my supervisory relationship or my advising structure with those students. I listened much more intently now than I ever.

Stuart Brown: Is there a story behind that, where you had that epiphany about this?

Dr. Justin Lawhead: I came here in 2003 and I was a midseason professional and I really thought that I knew all that could happen at this institution and not that I knew everything, but I knew what needed to be done. And so I had a Dean of Students that was my supervisor and had been in the field for quite some time and he said to me, Justin, I really do think you have phenomenal ideas. I really do think that you can make some significant change here. But if you don't listen more than the change that you envision and the change that you want to make happen isn't going to happen. And I think he exhibited that in a meeting, or maybe I was possibly talking over folks or maybe I was interrupting when somebody was completing a thought that would have helped complete the project or complete the activity. He recognized that and I took that feedback to heart. I wouldn't say that I was gonna flop on a dime right there, you know, 180 degrees, but I used that information for my leadership style.

Stuart Brown: I think that's so important, especially for young professionals because they might, not to say we don't have the energy, but they are raring to go, I want to change the world, I want to change this campus and sometimes they don't just put on the brakes to listen first or to actually just listen because someone in the meeting, two people before them said the exact same thing, but maybe they weren't listening that intently because they were so focused on I'm going to contribute this. I think everyone can just sort of step back and listen.

Dr. Justin Lawhead: Student affairs always has a lot of voices in the room, right? And it's a reflection of our diversity of our field. It's a reflection of the experiences that people come from. So part of my shift with young professionals is I think they respect me as a leader, They respect the years that I've taken through training, but years of service does not mean as much to a young professional now as it did maybe 30 years ago when I joined the field and there was a power dichotomy there that simply doesn't exist now. Meaning that when I sat in a room with the Dean of Students 30 years ago, I thought I didn't think I had a voice. I had to listen to what that person said. And young professionals treat that very differently now and I do think there are times where they might need to show some restraint and their voice might need to be reduced to listen more. But I also think they have a higher expectation from a senior leadership official to listen to the voice that they bring. And that doesn't mean that I have to take action on everything that they bring to me. But I do have to demonstrate to them that their voice is valued and that I'm seeking their voices as I'm leading the division and leading through the universe.

Stuart Brown: It also must be kind of like walking a tightrope sometimes because you want them to know they're being listened to, but being listened to doesn't automatically mean action is going to be taken from what they're saying.

Dr. Justin Lawhead: It is a fine line there. And so part of what I try to do is when I work with my staff professionals have a follow up, even with the leader of that division or that staff member and say here's what I've heard, here's what I think we can do. But I want you to continue to convey that. I do think that you make an excellent point there, that listening doesn't always translate into action, but it can translate into planning or there are many times people just want to express themselves and be allowed to do that. But I think you need to set those parameters to really convey to somebody, okay, I've told the Dean of Students, oh, that something is definitely going to happen and that we know how complicated higher education is. That's where the Dean the Students role is pretty interesting to me because it's a known title. It's had a long history in higher education. But in the same respect, I don't have the ability to change all the things that people think I can do. And we've actually crafted messages from students that have sent us emails and said, I really appreciate your message. I'm sorry you're going through this experience. Here's guidance on how to resolve that, but I don't have the ability to resolve that with my current responsibilities. So I think you bring an exceptional point. There is people look at your position and think it's going to create change and you kind of have to set those boundaries.

Stuart Brown: One thing I've also found in my experience with listening and I learned this, but it's not my time, so I won't tell my story, but you let someone talk and then I guess this is more maybe on a one on one meeting where you, as the Dean of Students might just sit there, let the person talk. But after they're done talking, they've actually solved the problem. It's just they've never had that sounding board. Or they don't...it's not readily available, but once they talk through it's like, oh, well, thank you for your help and you just nod your head. Glad I'm here for you.

Dr. Justin Lawhead: Yeah, there's been some confirmations of actions I've taken that have not really been any actions on my part, right? Nearly a presence in the room and sometimes create the catalyst for folks to understand where they need to be. And I and I've got enough of my agenda that if that process comes out that way I'm fully supportive of.

Stuart Brown: Justin, thank you for sharing that one thing. I think that is such a simple thing, but I think something that is not done often enough. So thank you for sharing your one thing today.

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 shaped your professional career? I want to thank today's guest, Dr. Justin Lawhead, Dean of Students at the University of Memphis. 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 of Student Affairs One Thing.