



**Podcast:** Student Affairs One Thing

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**Summary:** We chat with John Denio, Associate Vice President for Student Affairs at Bryant University.

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

**Stuart Brown:** Well 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 shaped 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 on today's episode. I am very pleased to have John Denio, Associate Vice President for Student Affairs at Bryant University. Welcome to the program, John.

**John Denio:** Thank you Stuart. Thank for having me.

**Stuart Brown:** So John what is your one thing?

**John Denio:** This is going to sound simplistic, but I think it is something that many people in our field believe, but not everybody does and this has kind of been a personal and a professional mantra for me. So my one thing is two words - people matter. And again, as I said, it's simplistic, but I can give you kind of the, the whereabouts from that, of the origins if you will, so.

**Stuart Brown:** Well, I think it's simple, but I think sometimes the simple things are the ones that matter and I, we always overlooked those because maybe we're looking for the highfalutin one thing or or something that no one's ever thought of and we sometimes neglect the obvious. So what's the story behind people matter?

**John Denio:** My introduction to higher education really. My first mentor give you the quick backstory. Went to community college. My first two years of community college played basketball there was recruited and was all set to go to a school in upstate New York. Actually went to June orientation after I received my associates degree. And then when they were looking at my schedule for the junior year at this new institution, let me know that I would have to retake my sophomore year. This is the first time I'd ever been told that information and basically lose a year of credits, which I said, no, I'm not going to do that. And you, we've never spoken about this before.

So here I was in late June, months before school starts. Unfortunately the school, I ended up at SUNY Brockport. We had already talked to them. I've been recruited by them for basketball and my mother reached out to admissions and connected with their director admissions, a gentleman by the name of Jim Cook. And by this wonderful, wonderful man's kindness, compassion, and grace - I mean to the extreme to the point where it's very noticeable and impactful on the people around him - and he was able to, they had space in their class.

He got me in and I ended up going to Brockport had a wonderful experience there and Jim actually hired me knowing my experience hired me as an ambassador in the admissions office my junior year and got to do college fairs with him and high school visits and all the things related to admissions. And he was so impactful on me. But again, the biggest thing was, is how I watched him, how he interacted with all the people on campus, whether it be a parent or a student or a maintenance worker or a faculty member or a senior administrator and the grace and the way he conducted himself and the kindness and kind of, it was kind of uh use another analogy as Mr. Rogers asked, you know, very a lot of attributes that Mr. Rogers, you know, you saw in him on this tv show and elsewhere.

So that was very impactful to me. And I think at a young age, learned at a college age learned kindness can be very powerful and very impact and working with people and very beneficial as well. And again, I knew that growing up with my values from my family and so on and so forth, but to see that in place in the professional setting as you're a young person, you know, ready to get ready to move on to the next step of your career. It

was very impactful. So that a lot of those lessons I learned from him as I moved through my career, tried to integrate that everybody mattered, every situation mattered regardless of how I felt about the individual or what the individual may have done, especially in my conduct days. So that was really, that's been my mantra as you know, people matter and and try to take that mindset every day and my work, knowing that it's not as common as you'd like it to be in our society and even in higher education settings as well.

**Stuart Brown:** I think sometimes people are maybe taken aback because they don't expect that, that they think it's going to be a certain situation is going to be adversarial right from the get go and the person is not going to take them as an individual with their concerns with their background. And so to come at them with a lot of empathy and caring, really probably got you through a lot of tough situations sometimes.

**John Denio:** Yes, I would definitely agree with it. I think, you know, I look at kindness and humility a lot of times people look at those as I guess soft areas or potentially some people, people look at that as weaknesses. I view them just the opposite, I view them as superpowers and I really believe that that, you know, what can be achieved, what can be accomplished with that.

And like you said, I've been in many situations, whether it be with students or colleagues or administrators where they think, you know, we're going to come at it, you know, tooth for tooth and we're ready to fight here and then I'll come from the kind of the opposite end of the perspective and and I think that can be very powerful in trying to rectify situations and come to common ground and common understandings. Again, it seems so simple, but again, I've seen many situations and and worked with a number of people where that was not always there in the forefront of their thinking or in their behavior towards others, working in higher education, working in any, any organization.

Obviously finance plays a big part of it and I recognize that that you have to have a good bottom line. But like many professionals have been institutions where at times I felt that the bottom line was giving greater consideration than the individuals who would be impacted by that. So that you learn lessons from that as well and you try to find the balance in that and understanding that yes, the school has to be in a good position, but sometimes to save a few dollars, we end up spending more dollars if we lose a person or we cut a position and then down the road, you've got to go back out and refill that position, you end up spending more money, you know, that's, that's a scenario I've seen that happen in a number of situations as well. So it's applicable in one on one relationships and it's applicable, I guess as a guiding force for larger organizations or organizations proceed with their decision making.

**Stuart Brown:** Have you had people over the years come to you and verbalized to you what you felt from the director of admissions that they said, you know, John, I want to thank you for or I admire the way you handled this.

**John Denio:** Yes, yes. I've had some folks that have, have shared that feed positive feedback with me and obviously that I appreciate that and that's it's also nice to get not the recognition but acknowledgement of what I'm intending to, how to interact with those folks is being received in that manner and my attempt and my goal is, and I guess it's successful in my interaction with those folks. And you know, a lot of times I've had people who, you know, initially on paper may be seen as an adversary or somebody where I'm gonna have conflict with and then in the long run through those interactions through that relationship through the, you know, trying to extend grace and compassion and care, you end up having a very positive relationship and I can think of some colleagues or maybe didn't get off on the right foot initially, but through joint efforts by both parties, you find, you know, you find a great relationship a great friendship and for some that have lasted for a number of years.

So, and I think it's also the other thing that's been helpful in working, particularly working with parents. And I do like a lot of us do a lot of work with the parents and it's usually parent calling because there's a concern or an issue or a problem with their student. And I'm a father of four and having my two of my kids through college, one almost through college and one about to begin college that has also helped me to gain a perspective in my work as well to be more understanding may be more understanding than maybe when I wasn't a parent or, or earlier in my career has been beneficial to help me and trying to help them. And then the bottom line is I want them to feel like they've got somebody at the institution for for for many of them, an institution, is this large conglomerate, who do I turn to, where do I go? Who's gonna help me? And my hope is in my interaction that I'm, as I say to them, you know, if no one else or you can't find who you need to talk to come back to me or

work with me and I will get you to where you need to be or where your student needs to be and so on and so forth.

And I've had many positive feedback from parents and even had connections over the years as their student was here at the school and beyond, where we've, you know, maintained a connection due to, you know, the support and the assistance and the advocacy that we've been able to provide to them and their students?

**Stuart Brown:** I think a lot of grad students, new professionals when they are going into the field, they're feeling their way around? How do they conduct themselves? Is this something that with the people matters that you either overtly talk to this group about or is it really you feel by demonstrating what you, you are putting into practice that really is going to affect them?

**John Denio:** I've tried to be more of the walk, the walk and talk the talk type of and lead by example type of thing versus the words and hopefully by seeing that behavior that would be, you know, help younger professionals, you know, in working with with students, because again, you know, a lot of them come right out of grad school new professionals and so forth. And yes, you talk about working with families and you're working with administrators and so forth, but until they're in that situation, it's right in the forefront.

So I think it's, you've got to remember that they're working with people that, you know, they have an issue, they have a concern and you want to find that common ground, but you also have to have that basic respect and that basic courtesy and that human nature. And again, not everybody has that and and and and that's, you know, the reality of our world today. And but I think that's not an excuse therefore to kind of meet them where they're at. I think it's sometimes you gotta take it and say, alright, that's where they are and I respect that, but you know, I'm willing to approach them and deal with them in a different manner and so forth.

And again, that's not to say that you don't get frustrated, you don't get upset because that that does happen, but you've got to kind of keep it in perspective. The common ingredient was first and foremost, they were good people and they were, they were people who were respectful of others and and cared about others. And then from there you moved on to their strengths and their abilities as colleagues and as administrators and so forth. But the common denominator was at their core, they were for lack of a better term they were good people and they understood the value of people and and how to work with others to achieve common goals.

**Stuart Brown:** John I want to thank you for sharing your one thing. Like we said at the beginning, it's so simple, but it's though simple things that I think a lot of times get lost and people matters. I think that's something you could put above your office door so people know that.

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, John Denio, Associate Vice President for Student Affairs at Bryant 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'll join us next time for another episode.

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