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STUDENT AFFAIRS eNEWS

What Do They Really Mean? A Translation Guide for New Student Affairs Professionals

By Aaron W. Hughey

This is for the new professionals out there; i.e., those among us who are just beginning what we all hope will be a long and exciting adventure in student affairs.

One of the biggest challenges new professionals often face is learning to decipher the language used by senior professionals. So, to help even out the learning curve for the most recent additions to our ranks, I thought a translation guide might be helpful.

As you read this, see how many of these phrases you have heard — and naively thought you understood what the senior professional was actually saying.

A senior professional says during an interview: *“We are looking for innovative, imaginative free-thinkers to come in and shake things up.”*

Translation: *“We think things are pretty good just the way they are, so when you get here, keep your new ideas to yourself.”*

Senior professionals love to lament the lack of originality and fresh perspectives among their staff members. But they also love to asphyxiate creativity at every available opportunity.

A senior professional says: *“I’ll put this on my list.”*

Translation: *“And I’ll get to it as soon as the temperature in hell drops to 32 degrees Fahrenheit.”*

Values determine priorities; priorities determine what gets done. Before you make any suggestion, try to get a handle on the senior professional’s priorities.

A senior professional encourages you to: *“Think outside the box.”*

Translation: *“But make sure you stay well within mine.”*

Very few senior professionals really want you to think outside *their* box; if you do, your career could have a limited shelf life. You’ve been warned.

A senior professional says: *"I'm not sure this is the direction we need to move in at the current moment."*

Translation: *"If you do this, start updating your resume."*

Being enigmatic and indirect is one of the defining characteristics of a successful senior professional.

A senior professional says: *"Don't bring me problems, bring me solutions."*

Translation: *"I don't have a clue what to do or I would provide leadership in this situation."*

When in doubt, kill the messenger. Throwing a new professional into the deep end of the pool in order to teach them how to swim is not "developmental." The Peter Principle is alive and well in student affairs.

A senior professional asks: *"What are our benchmark institutions doing?"*

Translation: *"We're obviously too stupid to be on the cutting edge of anything, so let's see what's already being done and just copy that."*

Making real improvements takes initiative, resourcefulness, and intelligence – qualities that have usually beaten out of those who have successfully worked their way up the career ladder.

A senior student affairs professional says: *"I know."*

Translation: *"I don't have a clue, but I don't want to be bothered about this right now... or ever."*

Senior professionals don't like to be overtly rude; they typically prefer the covert route.

A senior professional says: *"We need to engage our students more."*

Translation: *"We may be incompetent, but we can use the appropriate jargon to make it seem like we know what we are doing."*

Good student affairs professionals were engaging students long before the term was invented or became cool. It's almost an oxymoron these days.

A senior professional responds to an e-mail you sent with: *"Thanks for sharing."*

Translation: *"I couldn't care less about what you just sent me. Now get back to work."*

Senior professionals hate to be bothered with relevant information, empirical evidence, or informed commentary. Don't try to enlighten them, they just get annoyed.

A senior professional says: *"We need to build this into our strategic plan."*

Translation: *"Maybe we can talk this to death so we won't have to do anything."*

It's much easier to talk about doing something than actually doing it. The latter requires effort.

A senior professional says: *"We need to move a little slower on this"* or *"Let's not rush into anything."*

Translation: *"We are only interested in looking like we are doing something."*

Avoiding the appearance of failure means everything to senior professionals. It is better to never have loved at all than to have loved and lost.

I'm sure many of you can provide examples of other phrases that need to be similarly decoded for our junior colleagues. Please feel free to pass those along and I'll do my best to illuminate their real meaning.

Just remember, *"I'm from the government and I'm here to help."*

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