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# Lessons from Summer Camp: Lessons for Student Affairs Professionals

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# LESSONS FROM SUMMER CAMP

## Tips for Student Affairs Professionals

By Jacqueline S. Hodes, West Chester University & Mary-Alice Ozechoski, Cedar Crest College

As a young people growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, we were both privileged to attend summer camp. Going to overnight camp is a family tradition for Jackie. Her parents met and fell in love at camp. Her camping career started at age 3 and continued until the start of graduate school. Mary-Alice attended camp as a child and then worked for many years as an assistant director at a camp in her hometown.



When we became colleagues and actualized Mary-Alice's idea for a new student leadership overnight retreat, we connected with our shared camp experiences. As we talked with other Student Affairs staff, we discovered many had a camp story to tell. We soon realized that many of the lessons we learned at camp were ones we were using in our work with students and in our careers as a Student Affairs professionals.

The camp experience was a gift, but one does not need to go to the mountains of New Hampshire or spend the summer on Lake Erie for eight weeks to employ the lessons below:

**1. Make new friends and keep the old.** At summer camp, there are always the returners – those who come to camp every summer. And then there are the new campers who are just beginning their experience. Similarly, each year we deliberately plan to engage our new students and to encourage their involvement. It takes time for new students to learn our campus culture and become engaged in the co-curricular experience and we are patient with them. But, it is equally important to remember and invest in our seasoned student leaders. We need to rely on our juniors and seniors who “know the ropes” and can continue to move their organizations forward. They are learning new ways to engage as well.

*TIP: One way to encourage new student involvement is to recognize students who are doing well academically at the midterm grade point. If you don't have access to midterm grade reports you can acknowledge those new students who have taken a risk by joining a club/organization. Challenge returners by creating new opportunities for them to utilize their leadership skills.*

**2. Remember the CIT (Counselor in Training) experience.** A CIT has one summer to learn and practice the skills of a full-time counselor. No one can learn everything about archery and swimming and volleyball and crafts, but one can learn how to be an all-around good counselor. As Student Affairs practitioners we get a long time, often a whole career, to expand and improve our work and expertise. In the ever changing and expanding world of higher education, it is vital to keep abreast of the current issues confronting students, faculty, staff, and stakeholders. We cannot be experts in every functional area but we can be experts in student development, engagement, retention and success.

*TIP: Learn from your colleagues in Student Affairs. Shadow someone for a day or even a few hours. Get to know your faculty colleagues. Take someone for coffee and ask about their research. Take advantage of any*

*professional development opportunities on your campus and attend local conferences.*

**3. Teamwork works best.** Campers learn to live in tight quarters, share a bunk bed, and participate in team challenges, including color wars. In order to survive at camp, one must learn to work with others. Teamwork is critical for success in Student Affairs. It is necessary to share resources and to collaborate with colleagues. As campus resources and budgets dwindle the best way to influence change is to find department, divisional and campus allies. Working collaboratively distributes the work, enhances the impact of your program/intervention and most importantly, generates a sense of euphoria—a result from the synergy of genuine teamwork.

*TIP: When asked to sit on a divisional or university committee, say “yes” and become part of the team! You will meet faculty and staff who will rely on your expertise about students. If you are a reliable, thoughtful team member you can create career-long relationships. If offers are not coming your way, let your supervisor know you are willing to participate on committees, even ones that might not be directly related to your expertise.*

**4. Sing often and loud.** A summer at camp is not complete without singing camp songs. No one teaches the camp songs—somehow campers just learn them. Once campers know the songs, they sing them everywhere, all the time, with great enthusiasm. Student Affairs practitioners must have the same passion for our work with students. Equally essential is to have pride in our institutions. Enthusiasm is more than a good attitude and an extroverted personality. Showing up prepared for meetings, participating respectfully in discussions, answering email in a timely fashion, being responsive to requests, and having awareness of the impact of your attitude are ways to show your commitment. Bunk inspections are a way of life at camp and campers with clean cabins and well-made beds are rewarded. As role models to

students, we must always be ready for inspection. Students, our supervisors and our supervisees appreciate someone who is disciplined in their work habits and leads with a positive attitude.

**TIP:** *Keep a list of your successes and wins. Start a "Happy File" with thank you notes, accomplishments, and mementos of events where you know you had an impact. Refer to it often! Continue to have school spirit even in the face of disappointment. Go ahead and vent, but to a trusted friend or family member, not to students!*

**5. Write home often.** Writing home is a tradition and requirement that most campers would rather forget...until they reap the reward of letters or care packages in return. Families, often miles away, provide much needed support. Professional organizations provide similar support to individuals working in Student Affairs and often become one's "professional home." The network of colleagues is a limitless benefit. Our colleagues offer us their wisdom, knowledge, experience, and perspective. They support us in our challenging moments and celebrate our accomplishments.

**TIP:** *You can get involved in many ways—volunteer for a committee or a leadership position, write for a newsletter or journal, submit a program proposal and present at a conference, be a dues paying member. Your investment in these organizations will benefit you throughout your career. Start with PCPA.*

**6. Have a blast and make memories.** Swimming, hiking, tennis, and crafts can wear out even the most seasoned camper. The days at camp are long and activity-filled. Student Affairs professionals have full and busy days. The pace and scope of the work seem to increase each semester. When we entered this profession, we made a lifestyle choice knowing that

"evenings and weekends were required." It is essential for us to make time for attending student events. The joy of watching a student succeed in the theater, on the playing field, or in a leadership role is much more rewarding than cleaning out one's email cache.

**TIP:** *Block out time on your calendar to attend student events. Attend any student governing board meeting in the county and you will find passionate, bright students who are change agents and are living what you are teaching in your role. Take advantage of the activities, lectures, plays, and conversations that are happening on campus by inviting a new colleague to attend with you.*

**7. A good camper never turns down a S'more.** There is nothing like a S'more at a campfire. The crisp graham cracker, the sweet chocolate and the gooey marshmallow combine to make a delicious and memorable treat. We both have eaten our share. Sometimes the graham cracker cracks or the marshmallow burns; it doesn't make a difference, it is always delicious. In our careers we will work with talented, motivated, engaged students. And we will be challenged by complicated students, needy students, students who make mistakes, and students who spend hours in our office asking advice only to do the very thing we advise against. Regardless, it is always sweet and delicious to watch the students you mentored, listened to, supervised, and even disciplined walk across the stage at commencement to receive their diploma.

**TIP:** *Attend commencement and other traditional events on campus, including alumni functions. What we do matters to our students, their families, and their communities. If we do it well, each graduate will be touched by our collective work. How sweet it is!*

#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Mary-Alice Ozechoski (on left) attended Asbury Woods Day Camp, Camp Notre Dame and worked as a counselor at Camp Glinodo in Erie, PA. Her expertise is tie-dyeing, ceramics, and finding CITs in the woods. Currently, she serves as the VP for Student Affairs and Traditional Enrollment at Cedar Crest College.

Jackie Hodes (on right) attended Robin Hood Day Camp, Pierce Country Day Camp and Pierce Camp Birchmont. She worked as a counselor at Pine Grove Day Camp in Jamesburg, NJ. Her camp skills include archery, short sheeting beds and writing camp songs. She is currently an assistant professor of higher education counseling/student affairs at West Chester University having served 26 years in Student Affairs at the same institution.



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