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Mirror Mirror

Frank Shushok, Jr.
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Dear Faithful Colleagues,

Thanks to the magical opportunity to learn as an American Council of Education Fellow, I spent the fall semester on the campus of Wake Forest University. The American Council of Education Fellow’s program offers leaders in higher education the unique experience of being temporarily relocated to another institution, often with different demographics, culture, and structure. My home institution, Virginia Tech, is a large, rural, public land-grant university with a strong culture of science, technology, and engineering. Wake Forest (or “Wake” as it’s often called) is substantially smaller in enrollment, private, urban, and built upon a proud foundation in the liberal arts tradition. Wake is where I discovered Provost Rogan Kersh (whom you’ll get to learn from in this issue), and it’s where I learned the priceless value of discombobulation (the act of confusing or upsetting the norm).

The purpose of my fellowship was to strengthen my leadership and administrative acumen. Since that goal seemed abstract, I constructed a more practical aim—to use my time to strengthen my perspective about how students experience college. The lofty word for my self-appointment was probably ethnographer—I became a student of people and culture. But the way it actually played out was simple: for major portions of each day, I imagined myself a Wake student. From getting my new identification card, securing a parking permit, and checking into an on-campus apartment, to taking an undergraduate course in “Food, Policy, & Politics,” attending campus lectures, and exercising in the campus gym, the entire experience was opportunity to observe, listen, and gain perspective. Here’s what I learned, among a thousand things.

First, I learned that I must miss so much “life” on my own campus because, quite simply, I haven’t prompted myself to pay attention. Perhaps this is why Harvard Social Psychologist Ellen Langer suggests that mindfulness begins with “the simple act of actively noticing things.” I noticed Wake Forest—the people, the beautiful architecture, the landscaping, the cultural nuances. In this exercise, I woke to a whole new world. I’m returning home with a commitment to “see” in new ways, and to test the solid hypothesis that a whole new world really is available to all of us, every single day.

Second, I learned that hospitality, the generous reception of guests, visitors, or strangers, is our number one asset, because it uncorks the best in humanity. Hospitality is a building block for inclusion, a bridge from isolation to community, and a back-porch swing that makes folks want to sit or sing or smile together a little more. Hospitality heals, without costing anyone anything—and hospitality is free. (Yes, read that sentence again.) The generosity I experienced—from the students who welcomed me into their class, to administrators who adopted me as a colleague, to the housekeeper I came to know in my residence hall—fueled an energy in me that one can only want to pay forward.

Third, I learned that when you only look in the mirror, what you see doesn’t change that much. I think higher education too often relies on learning from “like” institutions—we basically look at ourselves, thinking it...
will help us see something new. It's a strange habit we have of benchmarking and consulting with institutions mostly similar to our own. Wake Forest and all its uniqueness taught me invaluable lessons precisely because of its differences. I'm done looking only in the mirror. How invigorating it will be to look as far outward as the higher education horizon spans—to learn from colleagues at diverse institutions who will stretch my thinking because of their different missions, ideas, programs, demographics, and market segments.

Finally, I learned once again that taking a risk, in spite of one's insecurity, even and especially when it means upsetting or confusing the norm...this is the seedbed for growth and creativity. I was nervous about leaving my job temporarily—about what I might miss in my known sphere. In the end, it was my insecurity, and walking into it, that paved a path to more learning than I could have imagined.

To discombobulation...

With hope,

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