

“Student Affairs Talk” • Troy Nunamaker, Center for Career and Professional Development • June 18, 2020

Q: Before we take a deep dive into your time at Clemson and specifically with Student Affairs, how’s the family --- hope everyone in your homestead is safe and healthy during the pandemic.

Nunamaker: We’re all doing great. We started working remotely as a University employee on March 16. My wife, Dr. Susan Nunamaker, teaches at R.C. Edwards Middle School and started working remotely about the same time. So, we’ve been trying to figure out what that looks like and feels like, which I know a lot of folks across the U.S. are experiencing the same dynamic. Both of us trying to get bandwidth on the home internet around the same times, but we’re doing great.

Q: Let’s retrace the steps of your journey. Take us through your academic background --- where you grew up, went to school and how you’ve matriculated your way to Clemson?

Nunamaker: I grew up in a small town in Ohio known as Middletown. It’s an old, steel belt type of town. Anyone who’s ever read J.D. Vance’s “Hillbilly Elegy” — that book is actually set in Middletown, the town I grew up in. After growing up and going to high school, I attended a small, private liberal arts college named Wittenberg University. I majored in psychology and business management. It’s really where my interest in working in higher education started. I was a first-generation student on the federal work-study program. You look at career theories, such as happenstance or chaos theory — I was at a federal work-study job fair, not really sure what I was doing. I know I needed to find employment, but it was my first real job fair. I was walking around and ran into an administrative assistant in the president’s office and just asked her for help. And in doing so, she took me under her wing, hired me on the spot. For the next couple of years at Wittenberg, my federal work-study employment was with her. She was a great mentor and really showed me how higher education can not only be a great place for education, but also employment opportunities.

After that, I worked for a short stint at the University of Dayton in housing. Then, I came to Clemson for the student affairs master’s program. I need to make sure I thank Dr. Tony Cawthon and Dr. Jeanine Ward-Roof for helping me find my path to Clemson through that graduate program. I started working in career services pretty immediately after graduation. I went back in 2002 and 2003 and secured a human resources master’s degree. I just thought it would be a nice balance to the student affairs degree. To wrap up that education piece, recently I finished and defended for the doctoral program in higher education and educational leadership. Dr. Tony Cawthon was my chair, too. I owe a lot to that man; he’s been a great mentor.

Q: Neil Burton is the executive director for CCPD and has been for a number of years ... when did you and Neil first connect?

Nunamaker: Neil and I first connected when he was working in cooperative education. I started working with the internship program around 2004 in the Career Center. He was serving over in the co-op program. We had interacted with each other for a number of years. He took over the executive director position in the 2010 or 2011 time frame. One of the first projects we got to work on together was the UPIC program — University Professional Internship and Co-Op program.

Q: You had a direct hand in creating and implementing a vision for the UPIC program, which places students into on-campus internships at the University ... tell us about the genesis of the program and how you’ve seen it evolve over the years?

Nunamaker: That is a program that exploded and in very much a good way. It’s been a lot of fun to work with a great team. Again, wonderful people to work with at the very beginning. I learned from Neil, learned differences and similarities in how internships and co-ops operate. Blending some of the best of both of those. Our pilot group for that program was 20 students in the spring of 2012. Where it started from was with Provost Dori Helms. She came to the center and had an idea for an on-campus internship program, told me what she was thinking,

and that she would put resources behind it. We went from basic blueprint to brick and mortar staffed in under about six months, which was quick. That first group of 20 students ... the goal was to have 500 by the year 2020. We’re at 900-plus students at this point. We almost doubled the original target. These are experiences where students have opportunities to work alongside a professional that’s already serving in a potential future role they might want to serve in. Could be a PR specialist for marketing students. Doing energy audits with buildings and engineering students. Students who may serve in admissions counseling capacities. It’s just a really neat program. Over the last several weeks, we have students doing some work on how COVID-19 has affected the state of South Carolina — economically, in terms of health care, everything.

Q: A few years ago, CCPD was able to team with a couple of campus partners to offer international internships to students. Tell us more about that collaboration?

Nunamaker: That was a collaboration between our office, the College of Business and specifically Leah Hughes — my co-instructor — and the study abroad office with Sallie Turnbull. The University had some students traveling internationally, but it wasn’t necessarily a structured and organized program. We got together and developed a task force and got representatives from each of the colleges across campus to determine what type of model would work for the largest amount of students from the various disciplines. We ran a course through the curriculum committee — a three-credit hour course — and it was approved. We partnered with API, which specializes in international internships. And then we launched the program, and we’ve seen consecutive growth. This was supposed to be year six for us, but we did have to cancel it this summer. We’ve seen nice growth and students interning in Dublin, Ireland and Barcelona, Spain and Sydney, Australia. Some really cool opportunities for students to get their feet under them with their profession as well as cultural experience.

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Q: The idea of core competencies ... nine traits that are desired by prospective employers ... when did that sort of emerge as a major tenet of the work done by the Career Center?

Nunamaker: That work was in line with what was occurring on a national scale. The National Association of Colleges and Employers — better known as NACE — around the 2015 or 2016 time frame was really doing some research and investigative work on what employers were saying about recent college grads, and what those college grads were saying about themselves. Up to that point, we had always referred to those desirable traits as transferrable skills. The language kind of shifted at that point. For Clemson, we have nine competencies. When a student walks across the stage at graduation and shakes the president’s hand, we hope that student has nine competencies to effectively display. We see the difference between a competency and a skill is that when you look at a circle where knowledge, skills and attitudes intersect — that is considered to be a competency. It was described to me by Dr. Kristin Walker, who started the work, like riding a bicycle. You can read a book about riding a bicycle, you can have the right mind frame about riding or have the right skill set about riding. But you need all three to become competent at riding that bike. No surprise to anyone, but those competencies we identified are leadership, communication, collaboration, technical skills, ethics and integrity, brand — those are the competencies we are working with faculty, staff and students across campus so they can better articulate how they’re securing those skills at Clemson. But we’re finding that’s where part of that gap is at.

Q: I was reading an article in a NACE publication earlier where you teamed with Dr. Tony Cawthon, who led the student affairs master’s program for a number of years, and a student intern, where you presented research findings on the leadership competency. What were the main takeaways from that written piece?

Nunamaker: We suspected a similar with the other competencies. There’s room to do research on those other competencies as well. If what we found with leadership

is consistent with the other competencies, part of the issue isn’t necessarily whether the student is or is not gaining the competency or transferrable skill while at Clemson, it’s that as the student describes the leadership competency, it’s different than what employers may be describing. To get into the weeds of that particular paper, we did a narrative analysis looking at how students wrote about leadership and how mentors wrote about leadership. And we looked at the language through different theoretical lenses. Students primarily talked about leadership in a transactional or transformational lens. Employers, or mentors, did not. The message there is: there’s an articulation gap. Not necessarily a competency gap.

Q: You’ve been a part of many professional associations and have published through several major publications. Why has it been important to you to share your research findings and work experiences with related audiences?

Nunamaker: I think we have an obligation that, if the University sees promise in a student when we accept them, we need to do our absolute best to ensure that those students are successful as they walk across the stage. Empowering students with the appropriate tools to be successful for life after graduation is really what career services and higher education is about. Sharing that knowledge is a part of that equation.

Q: You’ve seen the center’s success be lauded from a national standpoint... ranking No. 1 in career services by The Princeton Review on multiple occasions. What do you primarily attribute to those high rankings?

Nunamaker: We work with some great students at Clemson University; that’s a lot of it. The University attracts talent from all across the nation and from all walks of life. The other part is top-down leadership, starting with our executive director. It focuses on serving our students and caring for them and educating them. But caring first. When a student walks in through our front door, we’re greeting them and we’re excited that they’re in our space. When they leave, we’re thanking them for

walking through the front door and taking the time to talk with us about something we’re passionate about. That’s a lot of the equation.

Q: I’ve always found this fascinating, but in the Hendrix Student Center, you guys are tucked away on the third floor a little bit. Out of sight, out of mind, as they say. But yet, the rankings still continue to reflect the good work that’s been done. A leader is only as good as those around them, so tell us about the members of your team and how they help you enrich the Clemson experience for students?

Nunamaker: My role in the center is listed as chief solutions officer. We refer to ourselves in our team meetings as the internship team. But we do a whole lot more than just that. You look at Tracy Austin, who just joined us. A lot of talent there. She’s responsible for the competency initiative and all the data and analytics our center produces. The annual report, making sure we make good decisions off of data being brought into the center. Brittany Neely works with our off-campus internship programs, but she’s also responsible the way we market our material and our social media. She works with graduate student services on the Student Affairs side. But on the Academic Affairs side, you’ve got Toni Becker and Kelly Coffin. They make sure the UPIC students are hired and paid in a timely fashion. They make sure at the end of the experience they’re transitioned off of payroll. You’ve got Caren Kelley-Hall, Lisa Robinson and Jenna Tucker, who are all three site coordinators who go out and make sure the students are not only enrolled, but that they’re participating in the assignments. They facilitate conversations between students and mentors during the internship so that the student has a chance to reflect on what the experience means for their career aspirations. A lot of talent. They make each and every one of us look good.

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Q: With the move to e-learning this spring, departments across the University had to modify operations and services for students into a virtual setting as COVID intensified. CCPD was no different. How was your team able to go about navigating those challenges?

Nunamaker: We transitioned pretty quickly. I'll go back to giving credit where its due. Our executive director was pushing us weeks before the March 16 date to practice. I was talking to my team about this the other day. It was crazy where we're at now versus how comfortable we were then with this technology. You and I are on Zoom right now. But on March 13, 14 and 15, if you told me I had a Zoom call, we would have practiced a bit and made sure the technology works. And now, I'm on Zoom a lot. There's a joke about Zoom fatigue; it does happen. But we transitioned pretty quickly, because we saw the writing on the wall and knew it might happen. As a team, we were doing WebEx and Zoom in the Career Center board room just to make sure we understood the technology and did it from our individual offices. We didn't want the first time we experienced this to be in our household. Getting the word out to students after the transition was a big piece. The first week or two, we saw a lot of anxiety. They were anxious about the future or losing their future internships. We saw about 25-30 percent of summer experiences completely dissolve. The remainder, a large part of it, became virtual experiences. I kept reminding students that COVID was affecting everyone. Our goal in progressing toward summer was to figure out how to give students the competencies moving to next year. Employers are not going to ask why you didn't have the perfect or ideal internship. That's not the question they'll ask. What they'll ask is, 'How did you better yourself during this COVID-19 downtime?' We started seeing students come back to the table. But it took a few weeks of anxiousness. And again, we were sending out messages saying we were still open. But if you look at our May 2019 versus May 2020 contact data, we saw more students in workshops and career counseling contacts. That was part of the transition.

Q: What does it look like for fall planning? We obviously hope to move into Phase III for a full scope of operations. But we know we'll adjust to a new normal, per se. What contingencies has the Career Center made to prepare for that?

Nunamaker: We're still offering workshops and meeting with students in a 1:1 capacity, we're just doing it in a virtual setting. Our career counseling is via Zoom. Our workshops that we offer for student populations and professors is via Zoom. I believe we'll see a hybrid of that, and that's what we're planning for as we move into the fall semester. For students who don't feel comfortable for a face-to-face type of appointment, we'll still offer career counseling and workshops in a Zoom setting. Talking about employer relations and on-campus recruiting ... I suspect most of that will be a virtual setting. But we want to make sure we have the necessary tools and technology to facilitate that, and we're working on it right now. Ensuring that when students come back, hopefully, we're able to connect with and service them over multiple platforms.

Q: You came to Clemson from a small liberal arts school in Ohio. Now you've been here 20 years in a growing public institution, can you put into words what this place has meant to you and your wife and how your career has evolved to this point?

Nunamaker: There's data out there that talks about college students and their persistence to graduation. And specifically, some of our higher risk college students. When they connect with somebody on campus in a very meaningful way, they're more likely to stay until graduation. And that's part of the reason why I love Clemson so much and wanted to stay in higher education. To have that impact on students. And it happens every day here. There are so many faculty and staff who care about the Clemson community and our Tigers and what they go on to do after graduation. But in saying that, I also realize as I look back over the years, I've had similar connections with other mentors that is part of the reason I'm here and have been successful. That whole concept of a mentor to help a student get to graduation,

it doesn't go away. We look for mentors our entire lives and it's part of our chapter and how we are guided to be better individuals.

Q: Outside of work, what are some of your favorite things to do?

Nunamaker: We've got two little long-haired dachshunds, Emma and Indy. Emma was a family name. Indy was named after the Indy 500. Growing up in Ohio, I was really close to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and my father and I would go over there every year to the race. But, to your question, Susan and I traveled prior to COVID-19. We absolutely adore the national park system and look forward to getting back to traveling and experiencing other cultures and food and scenery. We love to go hiking. I have hit 49 of the 50 states. It's Alaska. Susan is at 43 of the 50. Our goal over the next couple of years is to get her to 49 and both of us to do Alaska together.

Q: What's the neatest state park you've seen in your travels?

Nunamaker: Susan's brother lives in Boston, so during the summers when we get a chance, we escape some of the South Carolina heat and go to Acadia National Park in Maine. It's a phenomenal national park, especially when it's 100 degrees here and you're still sweating after getting out of the shower. You experience those cooler temperatures, it's nice.