

“Student Affairs Talk” • Glenn Spurlin, Director of Orientation Programs • Jan. 6, 2020

Q: You’ve been in your role for exactly a year now ... what’s the most satisfying part of being back at Clemson?

Spurlin: It’s been fun being back at Clemson. I did graduate school here from 2010 to 2012 and left for several years. I’ve been back a year, like you said. The best part has been coming back and so many things are familiar and exactly the same. Some of the same people. But there are also so many new things. Core Campus wasn’t here. The Academic Success Center. Douthitt Hills. New programs and things like that. But, it’s still Clemson. So, it’s been fun to dive back in.

Q: How’d you go about re-acclimating yourself to Clemson? Like you said, you weren’t gone for too long. But a lot of that infrastructure had changed. How do you go about familiarizing yourself with the Academic Success Center and other facilities, and the new partners on campus?

Spurlin: DeOnte Brown has been acting as the interim associate dean and director of our department. One of my first days here, we sat down and literally made a list two pages in length of partners I needed to go see, either to reintroduce myself or get to know them. I spent several weeks knocking on doors, making appointments, sitting down with people and trying to build relationships and learn. Trying to take it all in, because it’s a lot. One of the things I enjoy about this position is there are so many people I work with all over campus. From Academic Affairs to Athletics to Student Affairs and everything in between. So, I went down the list and met as many people as I could right at the very beginning. And everything since then has been a reiteration of that. For example, when we were done with Orientation this past summer, we did debrief meetings with as many people as we could. All of the academic colleges and the advisors. Student support service staff. Housing and dining. We sat down with all of them. There’s constant meetings and constant ways to get to know people, learn that structure and sort of know what Clemson is all about again.

Q: You mentioned 2010-12. You served as a graduate assistant and I want to say you had your hand in different areas while you were here. You weren’t stationed in one department; is that correct?

Spurlin: I studied the counselor education program when I was here, with an emphasis in the student affairs profession. My first semester, I did not have an assistantship. In fact, I don’t admit this to very many people, but the reason I came to Clemson was not because I’ve always loved it or because of the great master’s program. It was because I was in the food service industry before coming back to grad school. There was a series of events that happened and my wife and I both said I needed to go back to school, to get back into education. By the time we decided that and got the application materials together, Clemson was the only program in the area still accepting applications. I remember my wife driving here the day it was due and delivering it in person to Sikes Hall. That’s why I came to Clemson. Come to find out, it’s an amazing graduate program. I was able to work with the Office of Community and Ethical Standards (OCES), which is located across the hall from our department here in the Union. I was able to work here in the Orientation office, which got me out on campus and meeting a lot of people. I interned with Furman University down the road. That first December, our housing office had someone leave and they needed to fill the assistantship in Calhoun Courts. So, I jumped into housing as a graduate hall director there and later in the Shoeboxes with our first-year students, as a second-year graduate student. So, yeah, it feels like I kind of had my hand all over campus.

Q: Following your graduate assistantship, you went onto full-time positions in housing at Kansas State University and into a dual role at Arizona State University. How did those roles help prepare you for what you face each and every day here at Clemson?

Spurlin: That’s a great question. When we moved to the ‘Little Apple’ in Manhattan, Kansas, being in the Midwest was a big change for our family and me working-wise. There was a lot of emphasis on staff development. The staff did a ton of stuff

together. We had a softball team. We got involved with some city volunteerism and things like that. It helped me develop as a staff member supporting the university. Going from that position — and I was there for four years — helped me get the position at ASU. And that school was a beast. It’s the largest public institution in the country, depending on how you look at the numbers. But it is large. For example, we do 15 Orientation sessions here over the summer. They did about 90. It was a dual role. ASU is split up into four main campuses, and I was at one of the auxiliary campuses. I was essentially the director of housing, but also director of Orientation on that campus as well. It was an offshoot of the general ASU Orientation office.

Q: Was there a benefit to having it set up that way?

Spurlin: For me, it was. I had all of the connections and resources of a giant research institution. But it felt like a small, liberal arts institution. It was a really interesting marriage. For me, I was able to do some fun programming and unique things both with housing and Orientation. I was working with a smaller population, away from Tempe and the giant experience. When I saw this position open at Clemson, it was kind of a dream job for me to get back into this office and work full-time in Orientation. I jumped at the offer and for some reason they brought me on board. It’s been a fun year ever since.

Q: As someone who’s had a hand in many facets of the college experience, how would you best describe the role of professionals within student affairs?

Spurlin: I’ve always seen student affairs as a supportive unit. Academics is so important. It’s the first thing we do at Orientation. Setting the stage for the Clemson experience academically. Student Affairs supports that mission of the academic rigor and pursuit of a student. We do it through creating linkages, experiences and opportunities. We help them transition and they become attached to the university by connecting to the resources they need to be successful academically. I’ve always seen as a crucial support to what’s happening in the classroom.

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Q: We're here at the start of the spring semester. Take us through what that looks like through the lens of Orientation. What does it require of students who may be enrolled for the first time?

Spurlin: Absolutely. A lot of the students we see in the spring are transfers from other institutions. There are a handful of new undergraduates, but for the most part, it is transfers. On Monday, January 6, we have both an undergraduate experience for students through Orientation and a graduate experience as well. It's a total of about 450 students coming in at the beginning of the semester. It's really a microcosm of the Orientation you typically see during the summer. It's just a bit abbreviated. We come in and talk about academics, connect them with resources, give them some options through interest sessions. But really, it's all about connecting with their advisor and getting signed up for classes, which start two days later. It's a little bit of a whirlwind, because we do some stuff on Tuesday as well through what we call Kick-Off Clemson. We have New Student Convocation and different ways we get them connected to campus. Monday is Orientation, Tuesday is prep day and Wednesday is right into classes.

Q: Most people think of Orientation in the traditional sense of taking place during the summer. Give us an idea of the workload that goes on behind the scenes in preparation for that? In terms of timeline, what is your team working on while gearing up to take in thousands of students and their families?

Spurlin: I think we welcomed around 17,000 people overall last summer. We do some smaller sessions in August, too. A lot of what we do is working with campus partners. A lot of space reservations; they happen so far out in advance of Orientation to make sure we have the spaces we need. And our partners understand the importance of it and buy into the experience, so it's fantastic working with them to get it all set up. A huge part of Orientation is our ambassador program. I think it sets us apart and is phenomenal. We start recruiting these student leaders in October and have them hired before the

end of fall semester. In the spring, they take a student leadership class that meets two days a week all the way through the end of the semester. And then they have almost a two-week long training program in May before jumping right into Orientation in June and July. We have a long time with these ambassadors to be able to help shape and prepare them to be amazing leaders whenever we get to the summer. It's a huge piece of what we do and it takes up a lot of time to be able to really give them what they need developmentally.

There's a ton of logistics and publications that we create, from schedules to booklets and all of the materials we give out to families and students. It's a lot of fun working with our Student Affairs Publications team and others to get those out. We work with our dining team for meals. And that's probably one of the most important things to some people. With registration, we work with advisors and the colleges. We have trainings throughout the year. We do something specific training for all the new advisors coming in to prepare them for Orientation.

Q: Your team has to be so in sync with the academic piece. I imagine it gets quite difficult to keep up with when you have employee turnover and things of that nature within the academic colleges?

Spurlin: There's no accurate list that I've ever found that encompasses all of the academic advisors for the different colleges (laughs). We do have what we call the Orientation consultants meeting. We invite everyone. There's usually around 100 people that show up. We do it several times in both the spring and the fall. That's really to get everyone on the same page together for Orientation. It's Academic Affairs, Undergraduate Studies, Student Support Services — everyone. We train new advisors and that is such an important relationship. They make a break a student's experience. In my opinion, Orientation Ambassadors and academic advisors are the two most important people they'll meet when they're here.

Q: Freshman versus transfers versus graduate students versus internationals. There are different approaches to dealing with and acclimating different folks to campus, right?

Spurlin: Yes, you can break it down even further than that. We have the Bridge to Clemson program, which should be a different experience. One of the things we're doing this spring is really building a different experience for Bridge students than that of a regular transfer. It's the same with student veterans. And athletes. They may not need the exact same experience as everyone else. In general, our 10 freshman sessions and five transfer sessions — that's what we're looking at. We will probably have four or five different schedules and experiences for students who come in this summer.

Q: You mentioned your wife earlier. You are a family man. How has everyone adjusted to living back in South Carolina?

Spurlin: It's felt like a homecoming. It's been a lot of fun. My wife's name is Melissa, and we have two kids. We met in college at Winthrop University and had been married for a few years before coming to Clemson for graduate school. Addison was born and was 2 years old when we lived on campus in Calhoun Courts and the Shoeboxes. And then our son was born 10 days before we left for Kansas State. They really grew up on campus and were born here. I just had them with me on campus last week and it was so much fun to walk by Benet Hall and tell them, 'You lived here when you were born.' The other night, we were watching the football game against Ohio State and let the kids stay up. They stayed up as late as everyone else. Every Friday, they wear Clemson stuff to school and are excited.

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Q: When you’re not at work or thinking ahead to the Orientation season, what sort of hobbies or interests do you have?

Spurlin: This position has allowed me to keep a balance of some kind. It’s been great to be able to go home with a better work-life balance than I’ve ever had before. My kids are 7 and 10 now, so they have something every night of the week, whether it’s basketball or gymnastics. I’m always doing something like that with them. I love sports. I enjoy playing, but I don’t get to play enough these days. I enjoy reading and watching movies. I’m really passionate about working around the house and improving our investment. Trying to be a handy man, which doesn’t always work out if you ask me and my wife.