

# Unity in Diversity: Conflict and Compassion at SUU

by Kyle Thompson

It has been a privilege to work with Dr. Jared Tippetts and Student Affairs as part of the Provost Fellows program for the 2021-2022 academic year. While I have learned, felt, experienced, questioned, acquired, and discovered a plethora of valuable ideas, I'll simply share three overarching themes I think are most important to the continued success of SUU. I invite everyone who engages with these themes to join the community and conversation by intentionally pondering and processing the italicized *Questions to Consider* accompanying each theme. Thank you for being part of our T-bird family!

## **Conflict Engagement: The Diverse Roles of the SUU Body**

Despite SUU being one unified T-bird family, different parts of the university perform different functions. And while these competing differences (in purposes, foci, objectives, aspirations, etc.) can be frustrating at times, diversification in the roles of fingers, feet, eyes, ears, heart, and other parts of the body is what makes the human body (and SUU) so amazing. Two parts of the body of SUU, Student Affairs and Academic Affairs, naturally function very differently. Serving in this role as a liaison of sorts between these two silos, I have discovered how these functional differences influence divergence in perspective and opinion on campus. For example, most everyone at SUU agrees education should be "student-centered," but each silo has a different idea of what that actually looks like in practice. Faculty make decisions based on how it will affect the academic-strength of the student's learning experience; Student Affairs advocates for an integrative and healthy student life; and administrators ensure the system remains sustainable, viable, and effective.

Though some on campus might see this clashing as a limitation, it is actually a healthy and invigorating advantage, if approached with proper perspective. Those striving for an intelligent and holistic approach to the success of SUU will embrace this diversification of responsibilities because ALL parts are needed, no matter how seemingly insignificant. SUU needs Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, and administration to function effectively and achieve our mission.

### *Questions to Consider:*

*-How can I contribute to the success of SUU, no matter how small?*

*-To what "small pieces" of the SUU organization can I show gratitude?*

## **Competing Cultures: Getting Outside My Silo**

We, as humans, naturally get sucked into our own personal sphere; I see my own silo, and this silo is my life. We see our own scope and naturally believe that our sphere of influence is most important. And unless we get outside our silos, we get stuck with a limited, sphere-blinded perspective.

When I was a student, my whole higher-education experience was encompassed in student-learning...and I had no idea the effort, energy, and passion my professors put into teaching. Then, I became a full-time faculty member and my understanding expanded (and I started catching a glimpse why some of my professors did the things they did). It wasn't until leaving my "student sphere" that I realized just how much work and support contributed to my success. Then, adding to my student/teacher perspective, my sight was magnified as I engaged in the Chinese education system as part of my work; it wasn't until I left my "cultural sphere" that I realized how my culture really influenced behavior. And, finally, this fellowship opportunity has helped me discard my "Communication Department" and "Academic Affairs" sphere-blinders to gain a greater perspective of SUU's holistic functioning. While one department or office sees things one particular way, other silos' perspectives can be extremely valuable. Diversity of perspective strengthens SUU.

This fellowship has reminded me how fulfilling it is to get outside myself and see others' perspectives. Don't get sucked into the potentially partite ambition of your silo as if it were the be-all-end-all of everything; have the courage to see the bigger picture. Breaking out of silos, connecting with others, abandoning conceited "my-sphere-is-everything" perspectives, and acknowledging my personal minimal scope of understanding enlarges vision.

Questions to Consider:

- What silos or spheres am I part of? How can I break out of these constructs?
- How can I shed my sphere-blinders to see things from a new perspective?

### **Mental Wellness: Compassion & Courage**

It was a privilege to be included in the initial formation of the task force convened to revamp our institutional approach to mental wellness. As representatives from across campus, we met to examine the immense mental/emotional/spiritual challenges borne by SUU students, faculty, staff, and community. We wrestled with personal and institutional narratives filled with adversity, distress, success, suffering, progress, rejection, isolation, and triumph. As I listened to my impassioned and genuinely-invested colleagues share their experiences, I learned several important principles.

First, everyone has endured emotionally taxing experiences. However, the universality of these experiences does not diminish or discount the reality of personal pain and suffering experienced by each individual. Instead, it provides an opportunity for each person to extend grace and space to those who are struggling. The best of humanity can be found in the humble "can you help me" followed by a compassionate "I see you." So, let's provide our T-bird family members with a little psychological safety by offering more grace and space.

Second, both individually and institutionally, we have the ability to embrace pain instead of attempting to avoid it. Endeavoring to escape discomfort might actually even increase suffering. We don't have to run away from the hurt; we don't have to shut off, or shut down, or slam the door; we don't have to bury, or obsess over, or drown, or destroy, or give up, or give in. Be courageous, because we have the ability to sit with discomfort without needing to numb or evade.

Finally, in a world chasing happiness, it is much more productive to seek meaning rather than happiness. Mental wellness flourishes when we strive for meaning. Emily Esfahani Smith, who recently presented at SUU's APEX event, describes the following "pillars of meaning": belonging, purpose, storytelling, and transcendence (see *The Power of Meaning*). What brings meaning to your life?

Questions to Consider:

- When fellow T-birds are irritable/overwhelmed/dismissive, how can I respond with grace & space?
- In what ways have I been trying to avoid discomfort or pain?
- Where do I find meaning, belonging, purpose, my story, and transcendence?

### **Conclusion**

As part of the T-bird family, what is our ultimate mission at SUU? It is NOT to have higher enrollments or grow as big as possible. It is NOT to get as many students as possible to re-register. It is NOT to increase profits or decrease costs. It is NOT solely to make education accessible. It is NOT even to give students, faculty, staff, or administrators a "happy" or "good" experience. The purpose pursued here at SUU is to courageously provide quality, holistic, abiding education to the diversely unified T-bird family, all while promoting an attitude of life-long-learning; after all, **learning lives forever.**