

**Years of
Experience
Are Not
Enough:**

*Seasoned Advisors Must
Continually Adapt*

By Max V. Vest

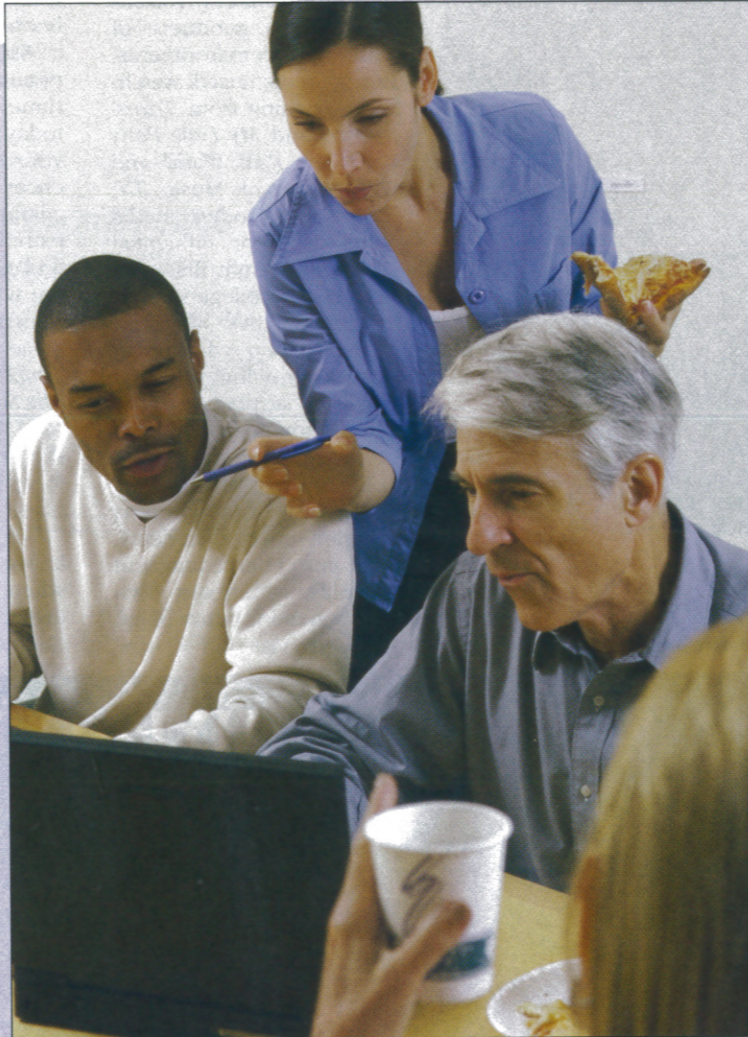
This fall marks my 35th year as a professional in the campus activities field. During the last three-and-a-half decades, I have advised students in the production of several thousand events and have attended countless more. With the extra hours of work that inevitably have been involved, my 35 years probably translate into something more like 50 years of 40-hour work-weeks. In fact, at this point in my professional life, most of my peers have moved on to different student affairs areas, have retired, or have left the field entirely.

However, there are many who are actively employed in the campus activities field, professionals to whom I refer as “seasoned advisors.” This group, including me, faces its own set of challenges in the current campus environment. Throughout the second half of the 20th Century, higher education has evolved rapidly and dramatically, and the role of campus activities professionals has changed right along with it, and seasoned advisors find themselves caught up in this whirlwind of change. While we have our respective educational backgrounds and solid experience working on our campuses, we know that our continuing success is not dependent solely on what we have done. Rather, we must adapt in various manners in order not to compete with, but to work alongside, those who have newly entered the field of campus activities.

This past winter I stopped by Indiana State University to see my former programming director from my own college years. Now, if I have been a campus activities professional for 35 years, that means my advisor, Linda, has been a professional for almost 40 years. That’s quite an accomplishment. Yet, no matter how long we’ve each been in the field and no matter what our respective experiences may have been, when I walked into her office we were able to communicate about our lives and profession as if it had been only a few years since we last worked together. We took up where we had left off—even though I

was her graduate assistant back in those days.

We discussed her upcoming retirement and how over time we both have made adjustments and grown with the profession. We also touched on the challenges that a seasoned advisor encounters in dealing with today’s students, organiza-



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tions, and the continually changing face of our educational institutions. After my visit, I reflected on how many adaptations we have had to make in order to be successful in working with our students and schools. Briefly, I’d like to share some of my observations about the areas of knowledge and skill that a seasoned advisor must have in order to work with today’s college students and the many changes that impact higher education.

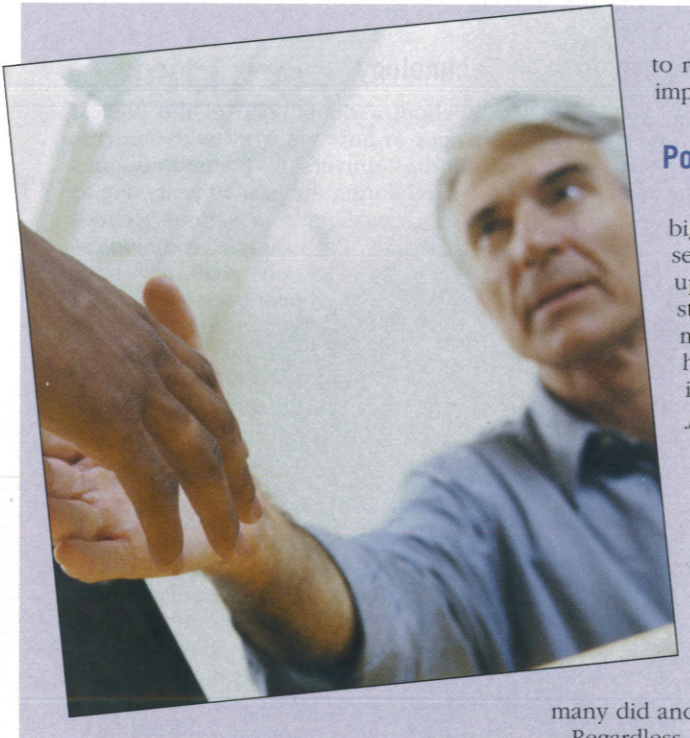
Technology

Without a doubt, one of the biggest changes in how we work with students and the university community has occurred during the past 10 years due to rapid advancements in various technological fields. For example, communications that may have taken several days to get out to the campus community now are shared almost instantaneously through the use of e-mail and instant messaging, web pages, voice mail, and campus TV/radio.

In fact, the way most schools interact as a campus community has totally changed. Many meetings that would have been conducted face-to-face 20 years ago today may be handled via e-mail or teleconferencing. It is now possible for me to plan major events and not even meet in person with the student who is organizing the event. Furthermore, the applications that are available for desktop publishing and design now allow even those of us who cannot draw a straight line the chance to create our own advertisements, flyers, and other useful printed materials.

However, the addition of these various technologies offers solutions to many problems and challenges that campus activities personnel often face—with one crucial stipulation. We have to know how to utilize them. While you might not need to learn how to create a web page by writing true HTML code, it is helpful to stay abreast of the latest developments in technology. Are a lot of your peers talking about a new computer program or other technological trend? Ask what all the buzz is about. Talk to a co-worker, or in fact, ask a student. Chances are they will know about it, can tell you if it would be helpful to you, and would think you were pretty darn cool for even knowing about it.

Take advantage of others on campus who may have specialized knowledge about technology, whether they are employees in your information services



to remain competitive and can improve his/her skills.

Pop Culture

It's no joke that one of the biggest challenges facing a seasoned advisor is keeping up with pop culture. Today's students are products of media-rich environments, having been raised watching everything from *Transformers* and *My Little Pony* to *MTV's Real World* and *CBS's Survivor*. Music, TV, books, and other media outlets are more influential than you might first realize. Ask a college student whether they watched *Scooby Doo* when they were growing up. You will be surprised at how many did and, well, how many still do.

Regardless of cartoon preferences and other favorite TV shows, pop culture itself is a good indicator of the interests of many mainstream college students. While many of the current entertainment offerings may not fit within our own tastes, you certainly need to know what

our students are watching, listening to, and participating in. For example, many students these days are talking about a show called *The Osbournes*. Most of us "seasoned" folks may remember Ozzy Osbourne as the rocker who used to bite heads off bats in concerts. But that is not necessarily how our students now view Ozzy and the rest of the Osbourne family on their hit MTV series.

While you do not have to be a couch potato watching late night MTV to continue being a successful advisor to today's students, it is important to know your students' interests and what influences them, their thinking and their pop culture preferences. Such knowledge is extremely helpful to you professionally and extends to things as simple as choosing what movies to show on campus or selecting a band for a concert. So spend some time watching *The Osbournes*, *The Simpsons*, Comedy Central, *South Park*, *The Sopranos*, *Friends*, *Survivor*, and *The Real World*. These and other popular shows will give you an idea of the world to which many of our students currently relate.

Yes, I still have LPs in my office, but I know those do not do me much good when planning a Friday night karaoke event. It is great to remember the past;

office, others in your own office, or students on campus. Technological innovations will continue to have an important impact on all our jobs, and by embracing advancements, a seasoned advisor is able

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however, if we're going to work with today's students, we need to be cognizant of what's really going on in the world now and how those events and activities shape our students and the pop culture to which they relate.

Professional Development

Even though many of us make educational presentations and are considered experts in our field, we still need to continuously update our knowledge. We should attend professional meetings and select sessions on new topics that interest us. It is also helpful to go to workshops and seminars/symposiums that are focused on certain issues with which we might be familiar, but which will provide us an updated understanding of the topic.

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Perhaps we should even attend some that we may have no direct interest in, but which are presented by a younger professional—their perspectives can be valuable in reshaping our own opinions and knowledge. It is important to use our positions as seasoned professionals as a gateway for interaction with younger professionals—it is indeed meaningful and beneficial for us to work alongside those who have just entered the field. We may actually learn as much or even more from them in our interactions as they will learn from us.

On our campuses, we should intentionally have lunch or meetings with our younger professional peers in order to get to know them and to discuss ideas and projects on which they may be working. Just because many of us may be "the authority" in our departments does not mean we are all knowing in the current campus activities environment. We should ask ourselves how we would like to be viewed by other professionals and students on our campuses—preferably open-minded and accessible—and strive to meet that positive vision.

Advising Style Adjustments

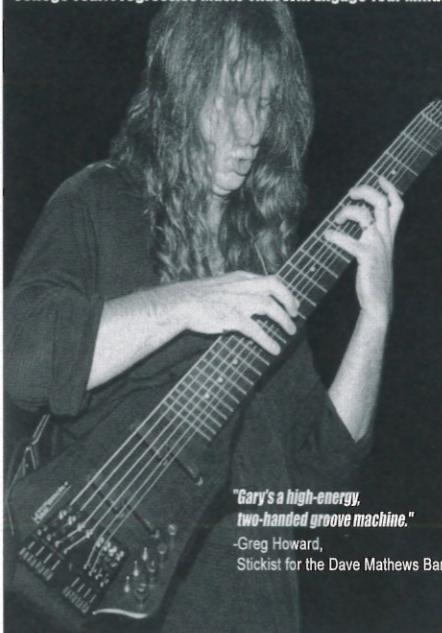
We seasoned advisors also must realize that because the environment and the students on campus today are different from those of 10, 20 or 30 years ago, we need to be more adaptable in our advising styles when dealing with student leaders and organizations.

One of the downsides of the technological advances available to us is that it is much more difficult to get to know many of the students with whom we work. In the past, it was much more common to meet directly with students. These days, such meetings are likely to be replaced by quick correspondences through e-mail. Especially today, the most valuable commodity a student has is his or her time. Students have been indoctrinated about multitasking and efficiency, and we run the risk of being seen as ineffective advisors if we do not adapt to their needs in these areas. If we are going to meet with our students, we must make sure that the agenda items are ones that provide direction and implementation of the program or issue being considered.

One of the most important decisions any of us has to make is what style(s) we will select in working with individual leaders and their groups as a whole. It may be necessary to select several styles to work with different segments of the

work. It may be necessary to select several styles to work with different segments of the

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same group. For example, when working with a fraternity, you may use one style when dealing with the president, another with the officers, and a third with the general membership. The challenge is communicating the same message to a group using several advising techniques, and that can be quite a lot to juggle.

Accountability and Assessment

So much of the campus activities programming landscape has changed on many of our campuses through the years. In the past, head count was the main indicator of a successful program. Today's advisor, however, is in an environment where accountability and assessment are two of the pressing issues we deal with in working with campus organizations. We must now be able to measure the impact that our programs have on the university community. As advisors, we need to be familiar with the various methods of assessment and evaluation that are available and which we are often required to use. The days of tallying results by hand have long passed, and we need to be able to utilize assessment tools effectively.

Keeping the Torch Lit

Burnout has always been one of the most likely reasons professionals leave the campus activities profession. Many of us have pursued this career for quite some time, and, therefore, professional burnout is an issue we must face. It can be very difficult to get excited about hosting a concert for 500 people in your building beginning at 11pm, especially when you have got to be there for this particular event—for the 20th year in a row.

While much about the campus activities field has changed greatly during my time in the profession, some aspects don't seem to change at all. A number of things we do today we were doing 20 years ago. While the popularity of some events does fade over time, there are

always old standbys that our campuses love and that we produce year after year. These offer their own challenges because they are probably large scale and somewhat high-stress events. It is our task as seasoned professionals to continue to have a spark of excitement for these events, even though they can seem somewhat repetitive.

What we all must realize is that for the

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students we are working with, this is possibly their first time working on this event, and we want it to be a positive experience for them. And our years of experience are valuable in providing them with insight and guidance. I still get energy from the new students I advise each year and from each well-run event we produce together. Even events that have massive problems provide me with a challenge on how to make the best of a bad situation. I have always said that if I get up in the morning and I am not at least a little excited about what I am going to do that day, then it is time to look to another area of student affairs or to another profession.

While our work is demanding, it also provides us with numerous opportunities throughout the day to make a difference in the lives of those with whom we come into contact directly, as well as in the life of the college community at large. I look at each year as a new challenge. It is a totally new beginning for the first-year

students who arrive on my campus, and my efforts every single day have the potential to resonate in their lives for the next four years. Keeping this in mind is how I combat burnout. However, I don't believe there is any guaranteed method to prevent burnout among seasoned advisors. Each of us must develop our own formula for keeping the torch burning.

Continuing to Give Our Best

Some seasoned advisors may have one year's experience 20 times over during their careers, rather than enjoy 20 years of growth in a profession they love—and that is truly unfortunate. However, others, such as Linda and I, have been lucky enough to strike a balance that makes it possible for us to continue to love our jobs and contribute to the university community. If you're also a seasoned advisor who's been giving his or her best to the legions of students who've come through your door over the years, I hope you continue to find the same level of satisfaction in your work as we do, and that you will continue to be an outstanding campus activities professional for years to come.



About the Author

Max V. Vest has served as director of Student Activities at the **University of Richmond (VA)** for the past 27 years. Previously, he served in student affairs positions at Loyola University of Chicago, Northern Illinois University, DePauw University (IN), and Indiana State University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in political science and a master's degree in student personnel services. He has held numerous positions in NACA during the past years, serving on the regional and national levels. He has been Chair of the NACA Board of Directors/NACA Foundation Board of Trustees, National Convention chair, a Founding Commissioner of Campus Activities, and the NACA representative to the Inner-Association Task Force for Alcohol and Substance Abuse Issues. He has hosted more than 20 NACA national workshops and national leadership meetings on the University of Richmond campus. He is currently the host coordinator for the National Leadership Symposium, in addition to acting as the academic coordinator for the Mid-Atlantic Region of the Golden Key International Honor Society. Additionally, he is serving on numerous committees of various other organizations on the state and regional levels.

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