Notes from the Keynote: Tom Rath

Tom Rath is cited as an expert on the role of human behavior in business, health, and economics. He has authored multiple books, including *How Full is Your Bucket, StrengthsFinder 2.0, Strengths Based Leadership, Wellbeing,* and *Eat Move Sleep: How Small Choices Lead to Big Changes.*

**How can student affairs professionals better use a strengths-based approach in our work?**

Student affairs professionals have probably done more to help people discover their strengths than any other group in the United States today. There is no other group, in corporate America or higher education, that has done more to create a concentration of people who have the opportunity to build their lives and careers around their natural talents. When I first started working on the StrengthsQuest program more than a decade ago, I was unsure if and how this could reach a critical mass of students. But thanks primarily to student affairs professionals and first-year programs, at least 2 million students have been through this program. So we’re off to a great start.

I think the next phase is about making sure that building on strengths is a way of life during college, not just a one-time experience. If someone just learns about their strengths and does not have any conversations with an instructor, advisor, friend, or colleague, I am not even sure it does that much good over time. What I have learned over the years is that strength truly develops in the context of a relationship. Some of the great research I have seen on this topic, from teams at the University of Minnesota, suggests that students need to have at least five conversations about their strengths each year in order for this learning to truly make a difference.

**Your most recent book is Eat Move Sleep. What is the one thing in each of these categories you would advise student affairs professionals to practice daily?**

The important overarching finding is that these three elements of health and well-being are deeply interrelated. If you get a poor night’s sleep, it leads to bad food choices, less activity, and so on. So the first thing is to think about all three elements in a more integrated manner. Then in terms of eating better, it helps to simply think about each meal as an opportunity to consume something that either gives you more energy for the
rest of the day or decreases your energy levels. From an activity standpoint, the most important learning for me is just to minimize the amount of time I spend sitting in a given day. All the research I have studied leads me to believe that reducing inactive time is even more important than getting 30 minutes of intense exercise everyday. A good general guideline is to aim for at least 10,000 steps a day. Then in terms of sleep, see if you can learn to view every additional hour of sleep as an investment instead of as an expense. When you need to be your best, give yourself an extra hour of sleep and it should increase your creativity and performance the next day.

**What is the one thing that you hope TACUSPA conference attendees will take away from your keynote address?**

I hope one take away is that we need to think about engagement and well-being on campus much more holistically. Right now it is easy to look at objective metrics such as first-year retention rates, achievement, or first-year-out salaries, but I would argue that there is much greater value to the overall college experience. I want my kids to grow up and attend a college that helps them to uncover their natural talents and match their strengths to the needs of the world. Even as I am looking at public grade schools for my young kids right now, I value the stories and opinions I hear about a school’s culture far more than achievement scores. All that I’ve learned in the workplace suggests that metrics like intelligence and income are far less important than things like creating meaning, having great relationships, and making sure you have the energy you need to be your best every day. So I’m looking forward to spending some time discussing how these broader elements can be built into the expectation of what you are doing to serve students.