Our Stories- Interview with Dr. Wanda Mercer

*Teresa Simpson*
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Dr. Wanda Mercer is Associate Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs for the University of Texas System. She became a member of TACUSPA in 1976 and served as president of TACUSPA in 1983-84. The following interview was conducted by Teresa Simpson, editorial board member of Student Affairs On Campus.

**How did you begin your Career in Student Affairs/Higher Education?**

I entered the Student Affairs profession in the mid-70s by accident; which seems to be the case for many in this field! People usually become involved in Student Affairs by seeing someone else do this type of work. You see that it is meaningful work and it makes you want to be part of it, as well. That is what happened with me at Sam Houston State. I was a graduate student worker with a teaching degree. I saw the professionals around me involved in student activities and decided that I wanted to do that type of work. I was enrolled in the counseling program and I discovered it was the perfect training for working in Student Affairs. My first job was as a Resident House Manager in the Housing Department. It was a perfect fit for me because I worked part-time and could continue pursuing my M.Ed. degree in Counseling. I worked there for a year until I graduated and then worked for the Housing Office developing programming in the Residence Halls and with Resident Advisor selection and training. I think that working in Housing is excellent training for those aspiring to work in Student Affairs. You become trained in so many management skills such as conflict management, counseling, and program development. It was good background and training for me.

**What is the one thing you would want to tell an aspiring Student Affairs/Higher Education Practitioner?**

Know who you are and be true to that. Just like everyone else, I have been tested by difficult situations. I have had my reputation and integrity questioned, but you have to always do what is right and remain true to yourself. I know that it is difficult to remember to stay focused when you feel you are under attack, but doing the right thing will win in the end. Make sure you hold true to the values that are important to you.
What do you feel you have contributed the most to in the field of Student Affairs/Higher Education?

I feel that my contributions have been with the students that I have impacted over the last 40 years. I feel that those students and the professionals that I have cultivated into the Student Affairs field are my legacy.

The other part of this, I feel that when you work in Student Affairs you are the student advocate. That can mean working hard for students in every group: making policies more proactive, recruiting students a different way, or knowing how a service could help students with disabilities more effectively, as examples. This becomes your legacy, as well.

I have held many leadership positions and was even able to start some universities internationally, but the students that I have served are what matters most to me.

What do you feel is the biggest challenge for a Student Affairs/Higher Education Practitioner today?

A pivotal point in higher education is the technological age and its impact on Student Affairs. Technology is changing the way we teach and learn. Student Affairs is a key player not only in helping students complete their education, but also in helping them learn in the new higher tech delivery systems. We need to figure out exactly what Student Affairs’ role will be in this process.

Please tell us of your journey in TACUSPA and the value it brings a practitioner in the field of Student Affairs/Higher Education.

This is one of my favorite questions and always makes me smile. TACUSPA has been such an important organization because it gives professionals a chance not only to get involved, but also to lead and excel.

When I was a student coordinator, before I knew what I really wanted to do, one of my mentors asked me to serve on a committee. I didn’t know it at the time, but it would lead to a 35+ year involvement with TACUSPA. While on the committee, people kept asking me to do different things and I became a newsletter editor back when we had to type it!

TACUSPA gave me an opportunity to shadow Jack Humphries, Jim Caswell, Libby Proffer and other leaders in the field. It gave me lifelong friends too numerous to mention (and many are retired) but I have known Gage Paine of The University of Texas at Austin, Don Albrecht of Texas A&M - Corpus Christi, and Rusty Jergins of Tarleton State for over 25 years, among others. They started as professional colleagues and became my friends. We were all starting in the profession at the time; we all had entry level positions. We matured professionally together. TACUSPA also gives professionals an opportunity to be exposed to all kinds of colleagues in a similar career. You get to know other people that you can call for questions; people who can understand your life and what it is like to be in higher education and work with students. I owe much to TACUSPA as it has given me much more than I could have ever anticipated. I have only missed 3 meetings in 40 years because I want to see it succeed, since it is so important to me.