

## USING THE FORCE TO SUPPORT STUDENT DEVELOPMENT:

# *Star Wars,* a Framework for Advising

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In our profession of student affairs and in our roles as advisors, we share in the responsibility of educating and supporting the students we are entrusted to support. As agents of the institution, it is without question that we seek to minimize harm to the institution and its community. The Jedi nobly seek to protect the Republic from harm and seek to train wise Jedi for that purpose. Our goal, similar to the Jedi, is to support the holistic development of our students.

For many of us, our collective path to advisorship started in varying places. Some of us, inspired by our own experiences in student activities, clubs and student government, have followed in the footsteps of our own advisors, continuing the generational succession of advisors as is the case for many Jedi in the *Star Wars* saga. Others within our field, without any initial aspiration to do so, were identified and simply asked to fill the role. In any case, our role has been noble and our intentions positive. Recognizing our differing paths to advisorship, we have varied approaches to our work and draw upon myriad philosophical influences in helping to guide our educational practice.

## A Pop-Culture Framework for Advising

The *Star Wars* saga offers a pop-culture framework for advising the students we are entrusted with educating and supporting, regardless of one's generational identity. As discussed, the kernels of wisdom contained in the saga can help us highlight the parallels in *Star Wars* with the *in the moment* experiences of our students. While my goal here is not to radically reform who we are in our professional practice as advisors, it is to offer a fresh perspective in how we consider the challenges of our work and increase the depth and richness of the student/advisor relationship as we endeavor to holistically develop the students we serve. Therefore, as practitioners like the Jedi, we should be *mindful* and intentional in our work.

I will draw upon the wisdom inherent in the cross cultural and intergalactic epic of *Star Wars* (Episodes I-VI). Though set "a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far, away," the storyline is not much different than the common experiences of the students we serve cohort after cohort. The challenges of identity, personal struggle and meaning-making as we see in Luke Skywalker in Episodes IV, V and VI and the transformation of Luke's father, Anakin Skywalker (Episodes I, II and III), are parallel to the realities of the students we serve. Anakin gradually diverts from the path of love and good intention. He is pulled by the gravity of the "Dark Side" into extreme anger, insecurity, deception, distrust and hatred of those things he once loved; a divergent path all too comparably common in our work with student leaders.

We see in the overall storyline that Obi-Wan Kenobi matures as Qui-Gon Jinn's Padawan (student) into a Master Jedi (advisor) and General. Obi-Wan mentored, advised and befriended Anakin, only to painfully see him consumed by the Dark Side of the Force; this is, hopefully, a rarity in our work, but an inevitable and unwelcome reality. Whatever our path, these characters are what the psychologist Carl Jung would identify as cultural archetypes and are as much part of our time, our galaxy and our profession as they were a long time ago and far, far, away. These characters and their journey collectively represent our story, our path and the never-ending challenge for the need to grow personally and professionally and to be mindful that the potential of the Dark Side resides in us all.

### *Jedi Master: Stoic and Unshakable*

There are moments in the epic when we can see vulnerability in even the strongest Jedi. Overall, we can see the Jedi Master as a model of a calm, collected and stoic figure.

Jedi embody stoicism. Like the Jedi, how we act as student affairs professionals sets a tone and presence to our persona as educators and helps us serve as figures of stability in the lives of student leaders. As we see throughout the *Star Wars* saga, the Jedi choose to follow a path of stoicism in the face of unpredictable challenges.

Pull a few student activities advisors in a room together and it doesn't take long to hear about how an event went wrong. The sprinkler system went off during an outdoor movie, drenching all the electronics. A programmer lost \$30,000 worth of concert tickets on a bus. If you observe long enough, you can gain an understanding of how these advisors act in a time of crisis and whether they are stoic like a Jedi. Are

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they calm and collected under pressure? Do they organize their thoughts in a meaningful way? Are they clear, concise and mission-focused? And as student affairs educators, are they mindful of the inherent learning experience inside each situation?

As highlighted by an instance in Episode I, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan are outnumbered and face a force much larger than their combined Jedi powers. In response to this, Qui-Gon says to Obi-Wan, "Relax, we're not in trouble yet." As they press on in their fight, Obi-Wan is reminded that he must stay focused on the *in the moment* realities of their struggle. A wise Jedi Master, Qui-Gon sees an opportunity to reinforce Obi-Wan's previous learning. Though wise to be mindful of the future, Qui-Gon says to Obi-Wan, "Keep your concentration on the here and now."

In the final battle with Darth Maul in Episode I, Obi-Wan's master is killed by the aggressive Sith, leaving Obi-Wan to fight the battle alone. Qui-Gon's death in this instance serves to remind us that we cannot always be there for our students,

even in the toughest of situations. If we help to prepare our students, they can function positively alone to resolve complex situations of the here and now. If the student can successfully resolve the situation alone, it is both a reflection of the student's competence and ability as it is a reflection of our advisorship. Obi-Wan was able to defeat the Sith because Qui-Gon took the time to intentionally prepare him. The chief aim of every Jedi Master is a well-prepared, wise and skilled Padawan who can be a Jedi in their own right.

*Jedi Master and Advisor as Fallible*

The story of the Jedi is a story of fallibility. This is best evidenced in Episode III with the culminating demise of the Jedi Order. The Jedi Council is betrayed by the elusive Sith as they discover Chancellor Palpatine has manipulated the demise of the Jedi Order and the control of the Galactic Republic. It is a realization for the Jedi Order that, in spite of their collective wisdom, intuition and experience, the Jedi could not see how they were manipulated by the dark arts of the Force until it was too late to stop the Sith's plot. Even the greatest of Jedi, the famed Master Yoda, was deceived by the Dark Side. Though our roles as advisors may not seem equal to saving the Republic from dictatorship, the importance of our position in the student development process is just as weighty. We can, as advisors, see our fallibility (yes, we are fallible) as an opportunity to grow toward becoming more seasoned educators, gain deeper insight into our practice, avoid stagnation, and gain wisdom to better advise the students we serve.

*Many Master Jedi to Develop One Padawan: Challenge and Support*

There are a number of student association models across the country that practice using multiple advisors as pivot points in fostering student development. At Western Washington University, the co-directors of the student union and Dean of Students collectively advise the executives of the Associated Students. Idaho State University, as another example, has weekly to bi-weekly advisor roundtable meetings to discuss developing issues, strategies to support particular students, possible advisor strategies for interventions, and collaborations on trainings. The Student Activities Board (SAB) advisor and clubs advisor participate in student government trainings and offer advice to members of student government. These models are intentionally structured to offer continuous and multiple points of advising in the development of the University's student leaders.

In the Star Wars saga, we see a like structure in the development of Padawan Jedi. Anakin was loosely mentored by Qui-Gon. After Qui-Gon's death, Anakin was primarily mentored by Obi-Wan. Master Windu and Master Yoda also shared in Anakin's development. Let us not forget the parallel and manipulative advisorship of Emperor Palpatine, who over time befriends Anakin and preys upon his vulnerabilities, ultimately turning him toward the Dark Side and into Darth Vader (Episode III).

Luke, the last of the Jedi Padawan, was guided by the remaining Master Jedi in the galaxy. Luke was trained by a wiser and more powerful Jedi Master, Obi-Wan, who then

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pairs him with the most symbolic of all Jedi, Master Yoda. It is in the exchanges between Luke and Yoda in which you can see the display of student developmentalist Nancy Schlossberg's model of "Readiness, Challenge and Support" (commonly referred to as Challenge and Support). We see this sequence when Yoda and Obi-Wan begin their training with the bright-eyed and youthful Luke in Episode V. By assessing his readiness for training as a Jedi Knight, Yoda and Obi-Wan have a brief glimpse of how this training could potentially be digested initially. Both Obi-Wan and Yoda know that if balance is to be restored to the Force as the prophecy predicts, they must patiently prepare Luke to avoid the manipulative tactics of the Emperor. They see in Luke his love for his family and friends—Yoda and Obi-Wan know the emotional attachment of love was leveraged to bring Luke's father, Anakin, to the Dark Side.

In the same episode, on the swampy planet of Dagobah, as part of Luke's Jedi training, Yoda challenges Luke with a vision of Darth Vader—an attempt to help Luke explore the feelings he would need to resolve before he could become a Jedi Knight and defeat the Emperor. In this scene, we see Luke demonstrate his fear of Vader. After training Luke, Yoda becomes more aware of his Padawan's needs, presents challenges, and offers his support through additional training. One may even view these challenges as a form of support for Luke's growth and development.

We see another teachable moment in Luke's training on Dagobah. When Yoda sinks Luke's fighter into a swamp, he encourages Luke to use the Force to raise the ship. The skeptical Luke says, "We'll never get it out—I'll give it a try." Yoda challenges, "Do or do not, there is no try. Unlearn what you have learned." Luke attempts to lift the ship and fails, due to his lack of confidence in the power of the Force. He says to Master Yoda, "You want the impossible." Still frustrated, Luke walks away. Yoda says, "Size matters not," and he shows Luke the limitation of his thinking by gracefully lifting the ship from the swamp. Yoda, in this moment, needed to say no more and provided incentive for Luke to carry on in the development of his Jedi powers.

The advisor's role in the student learning experience is a crucial one in the ongoing development of helping students move past roadblocks. As a result of his training on Dagobah with Master Yoda, Luke was able to better realize his potential in utilizing the Force. He would not have been able to achieve his greatness as a Jedi if Yoda had not challenged his concept of the Force's power. As previously described, Yoda helped the developing Padawan at a fundamental junction in his development.

We, as advisors, continually serve in this role when faced with the development of the students we serve. We should not take ourselves too seriously in our role. We see at the start of Episode VI a wiser and more mature Luke, who developed well beyond the training he received on Dagobah. This suggests that we may serve as advisor to a student only for a particular episode of their personal or academic development. After all, our ultimate goal is to develop wise, successful, self-sustaining students and leaders.

### *The Jedi's Path Is a Path of Knowledge*

The Star Wars saga can be dissected and parallels can be drawn between the lives of the Jedi and our own experiences as advisors and the students we support. Above all, we can see the Master Jedi as committed to the task of nurturing Padawan in their development; it is an intentional responsibility and, like our own, steeped in a tradition that encourages us to continually grow and learn. It also encourages us to be mindful that our work is conscious rather than passive.

Yoda once shared with Luke that a Jedi uses the Force for knowledge. In this vein of thought, "May the Force be with you" in your pursuits as educators.

### About the Author

**Jason Schlegel** is director of Student Success & Retention and Phi Theta Kappa advisor at **Columbia Basin College (WA)**. He previously served as a clubs and graduate student advisor at Western Washington University, as well as coordinator of New Student Orientation and Student Activities at Idaho State University. In NACA, he served as the educational sessions coordinator for NACA West in 2006–07. He holds a bachelor's degree in psychology from The Evergreen State College (WA) and a master's degree in student affairs administration from Western Washington University.



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