

A Personal Interview with **Richard Mullendore:** **A Pillar of the Profession**

Interviewed by Denise L. Rode



The words “wise leader,” “master teacher,” and “mentor” all describe the subject of this Pillar of the Profession interview, Dr. Richard “Dick” Mullendore, who retired from his position as Professor of College Student Affairs at the University of Georgia in July 2014. Dick is well known to members of the National Orientation Directors Association as a former President (1990-1992) and recipient of several association awards, including the President’s Award (1994) and the award for Outstanding Contributions to the Profession (2003). He is also a Fellow of the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition®.

In his long career in higher education, Dick has overseen almost every aspect of Student Affairs—from residence halls to athletics, from enrollment management to health services, from student conduct to multicultural student services, and from crisis intervention to advising undecided students. A constant through most of his career has been a focus on new student and family orientation programs, and he remains committed to NODA as his professional “home association.”

Dick has served in a variety of public and private institutions, including Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, Michigan State University, Tusculum College (Tennessee), the University of Charleston (West Virginia), the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, the University of Mississippi, and the University of

Georgia, where he was Vice President for Student Affairs and Associate Provost as well as a faculty member.

Dick is a well-respected author, speaker, and consultant. He has written more than 30 journal articles, book chapters, and monographs; has consulted at more than 20 higher education institutions; and has served in leadership roles for the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), College Educators International (ACPA), and several regional associations. Dr. Mullendore will be a featured speaker at the 2014 NODA Conference in Orlando in November.

On a personal note, this interviewer considers herself to be fortunate to have Dick Mullendore as a colleague, mentor, and friend. She writes, "Dick is a person you can go to for wise professional counsel, for cutting-edge knowledge of what's happening in the field, and for a good story or joke; his 'down-home' brand of humor is renowned in NODA circles."

Denise Rode: Tell us about your story in higher education. How did you find yourself in higher education, and what has been the trajectory of your career?

Dick Mullendore: I grew up on college campuses, including the University of Virginia and Bradley University, and was an active student as an undergraduate.

Upon graduation, I realized my major (speech and hearing sciences) was not what I wanted, so I turned down a graduate fellowship and traveled and worked for three years until I found out about student affairs preparation programs. I worked in housing while doing my master's degree and doctorate, but left my Ph.D. program prior to doing the dissertation. I couldn't handle another Michigan winter, so I went south to work.

I worked for two years at Tusculum College in Tennessee and still did not work on the dissertation, so I took a position with a colleague under a Federal Title III grant, which allowed me to conduct and complete my research. I then worked for three years as the senior student affairs officer and athletic director at the University of Charleston in West Virginia.

My next position was at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, where I served as dean of students and then associate vice chancellor for Student Affairs. I left UNCW after 12 years to become vice chancellor for Student Life at the University of Mississippi for three years before taking the position of vice president for Student Affairs at the University of Georgia. Five years later (2004), I joined the faculty full time as a professor of College Student Affairs Administration. My current position allows me to give back to the profession that treated me so well and entails a lot less stress and more time for golf.

DR: What roles have professional associations played in your career as a higher education professional and faculty member?

DM: I would not be where I am or who I am if it were not for the opportunities I have had to be involved in professional associations. Over the years, I have been active in ACPA, NASPA, and of course, NODA. My work with

NODA led me to a wonderful relationship with the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition®. As a result of these involvements, I have been able to give presentations, workshops, and speeches and have had many opportunities to publish.

DR: How have students and colleges changed since the time you entered the profession?

DM: I am completing my 41st year as a student affairs professional and faculty member, and so much has changed over the years; it is difficult to explain. It all begins with the reasons students attend college.

Today's students are focused on getting a job that pays extremely well, but doesn't require a lot of their time so they can have wonderful work-life balance. (My cynicism is now appearing.) Watch students as they walk across campus, peek into classrooms and residence halls, and try to convince me that students are excited about learning and serving and changing the world for the better. They sit slumped in their seats with their hats on backwards surfing the web while a faculty member tries to engage them in the learning process. Anyone can get a college degree today, so I think it has lost its meaning and is more like the high school diploma of 40 years ago.

That said, staff and faculty have to work really hard to put out a product that society can be proud of. Colleges are no longer driven by the faculty and rigor; they are ruled by administrators who make a lot of money and who may never have worked at a college before taking a high-level position. Image and rankings seem more important than creating an exciting learning environment. Complying with state and federal regulations requires incredible amounts of time and resources that have little or nothing to do with the college experience. College has gotten so expensive that student debt is now a huge issue, which will impact the standard of living that students desire upon graduation. All of these factors make the work of student affairs administrators even more important as they try to help these students navigate the college experience and get them prepared for the world beyond the college walls.

DR: One topic that you frequently speak and write about is working with parents and families in higher education. How did that interest develop?

DM: When I was working at UNCW, I really enjoyed running the orientation programs and put together a parent program before it was cool to do so. That led to my NODA and First-Year Experience involvement. At that time, no one was writing about orientation or parents, so I took the leap with the support of both groups, NODA and the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition®, and found that I enjoyed the topics and the writing. I think we each have to find our niche—our passion within our field—and mine turned out to be student success. I believe that getting students started right and partnering with parents are keys to student success, and I have been able to remain

excited about orientation and parents as a result.

DR: How has NODA changed in the time in which you've been involved?

DM: NODA was a small, struggling, loosely run organization back in the 1980s, and it almost ran out of money. Because of strong, committed leaders and some calculated risks, the association is now incredibly strong with a very bright future. The expanded mission is great but must be backed with action, not just a tag line. I am very optimistic about NODA's future.

DR: What do you know now that you wish you knew when you began your career in higher education?

DM: I wish I knew the value of professional association involvement earlier in my career; my graduate students will tell you that I push it hard on them. I wish I knew that the more you move up, the more you get away from why you started in the field to begin with. I wish I knew that upper-level administrators would so often be ethically challenged, and I wish I knew that writing book chapters and editing books would pay off so well in terms of traveling and speaking in the US, Canada, the UK, Ireland, and Japan.

DR: With your many professional responsibilities, how do you keep your life balanced?

DM: I have a goofy sense of humor, I keep physically fit, and I am clueless about the stress and details of life. Other than some well-earned cynicism, I am a happy, positive, easy-going guy who can't wait to see what tomorrow brings.

DR: As you look back, what have been the highlights of your career?

DM: Primarily because of my writing, I have been able to provide keynote addresses to the national conferences of student affairs professionals in both the UK and Ireland, as well as at an international conference in Japan. These were certainly highlights. But, the most rewarding part of my career is the many students whose lives I have touched in some way. I cannot describe what it felt like at NODA 2013 in San Antonio to be able to spend time with 15 former students who are now orientation professionals. I am one lucky guy!