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Book Review
THE INFINITE GAME:
SERVING STUDENTS FROM
AN INFINITE MINDSET

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"The Infinite Game," by Simon Sinek, is a business book that is applicable to student activities. This book review intends to review the content of the book while directly connecting how the information applies to our work as student activities practitioners. As we rebuild our campus communities out of the global pandemic caused by COVID-19, an opportunity exists to lead with an Infinite Mindset, and best serve students both today and into the future.

The Infinite Game by Simon Sinek is a business book that is applicable to student activities. You may be thinking that treating higher education as a business is a mistake. I could not agree more. This book is applicable because it challenges prominent business practices that focus only on the short-term bottom-line impact. It also asks us to put people above profits, which will ultimately pay dividends over the long haul. The vast majority of campus activities professionals have spent the better part of the past 18 months providing virtual services to students. In the face of the challenges presented by this COVID-19 global pandemic, campus activities professionals are positioned to deliberately rebuild community and campus culture at our respective institutions. While the importance of community and the sense of belonging derived from campus activities should not be understated, the budget outlook is not overly favorable for many campuses. As such, campus activities departments must find ways to show their value to holistic student development. This review analyzes key elements of *The Infinite Game* and presents ways that the content applies to our praxis.

FINITE VS. INFINITE GAME

To understand the concept of an infinite mindset, one must first explore the difference between a finite game and an infinite game. Sinek credits James P. Carse's 1986 *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility* as how he learned about finite and infinite games. Key elements of a finite game are that the players are known, rules for playing are clear, and there is an objective that, when reached, definitively ends the game. Conversely, infinite games have both known and unknown players, there are no necessarily agreed-upon rules, and there is no time horizon that ever definitively ends the game.

In conversations with colleagues, silos can be identified not only between Faculty, Academic Affairs, and Student Affairs but often within student affairs. One such example of a silo within student affairs may be how enrollment management and campus activities compete for resources even though the two functional areas are intertwined. The reasons may vary (i.e., organizational structure, budget in-fighting, etc.), but a silo existing is a sign of a finite game being played. The inaugural issue of this journal contained an article, *How Campus Activities Can Lead the Modern University: Five Imperatives,* that I would consider a call to action. One such imperative is to reconsider assessment with the student at the center. Tracking attendance and satisfaction surveys are valuable tools for measuring the success of our programs and justifying that campus activities provide value connected to the budget associated with programming. Tempting as it may be to compete with other departments and center

our assessment around what many of our campus decision-makers want to see, a finite mindset may be in place if that is the extent of an assessment plan. We need to strive to measure student growth holistically through established learning outcomes and reimagining how we assess student learning. Focusing our campus activities work on student learning means genuinely taking the approach of an infinite mindset and will ultimately lead to improved satisfaction and attendance.

FIVE ESSENTIAL PRACTICES

It is important to note that this book review is not a comprehensive chapter-by-chapter analysis. Rather it is intended to identify, discuss, and connect key elements to display how leading and working from an infinite mindset can have an extraordinary, positive impact on our programs within student activities. The book discusses five essential practices necessary to adopt an infinite mindset. While each of these practices alone has value, all of them must be done in conjunction with one another to have maximum impact. The following sections provide foundational insight into each of the five practices.

Advance a Just Cause

"A Just Cause is a specific vision of a future state that does not yet exist." A Just Cause must be affirmative and optimistic, inclusive, for the primary benefit of others, resilient, and idealistic," (Sinek, 2019, p. 37). The difference between being for or against something can sometimes be indistinguishable. Using the example of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) work, there are many times where students rally against an unjust worldly event or policy decision (recent examples may include police brutality and the attempted removal of protections provided through DACA). However, this opposition by itself does not represent a Just Cause. Instead, a Just Cause requires one to be affirmative and optimistic. A NACA specific example of a Just Cause could be pulled out of the Competencies for Diversity and Inclusion resource, "[One of the] core values is Inclusivity, by which NACA is committed to creating, with intention, an environment where all people can thrive and be successful," (NACA Diversity and Inclusion Task Force, 2018). Everything we do through our work should have the primary purpose of benefitting the students we serve. If our Just Cause is well-crafted and we strive to work towards that Cause, we are much more likely to create an inclusive environment that inspires others to want to, and be able to, join in.

Utilizing the book as a means to create conversation on your campuses is highly encouraged. If connecting with colleagues that are internal to your department and supportive of you, the book can aid in creating a Just Cause specific to your institution and stimulate conversation about how to advance the Just Cause intentionally. If there are colleagues on your campus that are skeptical about the power of campus activities, engaging in conversation about the book can prove valuable from the sense of helping them to see the way your work connects to advancing a Just Cause.

Build Trusting Teams

"When we are not on a Trusting Team, when we do not feel like we can express any kind of vulnerability at work… we hide mistakes … and we would never admit we need help for fear of humiliation," (Sinek, 2019, p. 106). A trusting team is truly the backbone of leading with an infinite mindset. Are we treating student leaders on activities boards in a transactional way that works because of the mutual desire to get things done? Are we positively supporting our campus activities colleagues? Are we building a culture of trust that leads to synergy? Do our colleagues and student leaders feel comfortable being vulnerable with us? Vulnerability will lead to innovation because fear of making a mistake is eradicated.

The level that the COVID-19 Global Pandemic impacted each of our campus communities may vary. However, all of us have felt the impact in some meaningful way. Whether or not we choose to approach our work with an infinite mindset, we are faced with rebuilding the culture for student leaders on our campus. Culture building is a lot of work and "starts by creating a space in which people feel safe and comfortable to be themselves," (Sinek, 2019, p. 121). We are all returning to campus at different times and ramping back to 100% activity at different rates. Because many of our campuses have been primarily remote for an extended period, much institutional knowledge will have disappeared without passing it on to the next generation. The work to rebuild culture is not

a choice, and what better time to learn to approach doing so with an infinite mindset? If we approach our work through the lens of student development and create space for students to be vulnerable and make mistakes, a Trusting Team will follow.

Study Worthy Rivals

We select our own worthy rivals, and in selecting a rival, "the main point is that they do something as well or better than us," (Sinek, 2019, p. 161). It is essential to note that a rival is not a competitor. We should not be seeking to *beat* our worthy rivals – we should seek to *learn* from their successes. A rival can be from within our industry or from outside of it. NACA provides an excellent outlet for campus activities professionals to identify worthy rivals inside and outside higher education. The NACA Connect tool allows us to learn from each other by posting questions and sharing best practices that are not competitive in any way whatsoever. The NACA 24/7 database of associates allows us to connect with those who specialize in their specific area to connect that expertise directly to our students. One example of how this applies to the Worthy Rival concept is a campus's decision to pay for a professional virtual escape room for all students to engage, but take the time to learn how to build a virtual escape room to increase the engagement at a virtual student leader retreat. Even though we have proven the ability to create our own virtual escape room (we learned from our worthy rival), we would still seek to contract an associate in the future as we trust their capacity for serving a higher volume of students while maintaining the fun and vibrant atmosphere that students are often seeking when participating in a virtual event experience (we recognize where our rival is superior and avoid trying to beat them).

Existential Flexibility & Courage to Lead

While Existential Flexibility and Courage to Lead are separate essential practices/chapters in Sinek's book, they are intertwined regarding the approach that student activities professionals need to take moving forward. "Existential flexibility is the capacity to initiate an extreme disruption to a business model or strategic course to more effectively advance a just cause," (Sinek, 2019, p. 185). Without argument, COVID-19 has caused an extreme disruption to campus activities. We were all positioned differently to adjust our campus activities programs to a virtual format and continue helping our students feel connected to the campus community. In the early months of 2019, a campus leader approached me regarding the need to build out more digital programming for our (at the time) fully commuter campus. Admittedly, I balked at the request and doubled down on trying to find ways to engage our population at in-person events. An existential flex "happens when the company is fully formed and functioning… and is existential because the leader is risking the apparent certainty of the current, profitable path with the uncertainty of a new path," (Sinek, 2019, p. 186-187). Due to my inability to commit to an existential flex in 2019, my department was less equipped to serve students during the global pandemic than we needed to be. In short, it is important for us as campus activities professionals not to be satisfied with the status quo and constantly seek opportunities for an existential flex that keeps our programming fresh and adaptable to any circumstance.

"Courage, as it relates to leading with an infinite mindset, is the willingness to completely change our perception of how the world works," (Sinek, 2019, p. 200). No one is perfect, and even the most courageous leaders will stray from an infinite mindset. A courageous leader will recognize that an organization is straying from its Cause and take action to get back into an infinite mindset. The easiest path to an organization playing an infinite game is for upper administration to lead the charge. However, as we approach our work, we must identify how Student Affairs, particularly campus activities, might find the courage to lead the way into higher education, cementing a culture of an infinite mindset. This book was written in 2019 and shared two key ways to find the courage to lead: 1) wait for a life-altering experience that shakes us to our core or 2) find a Just Cause that inspires us (Sinek, p. 200-201). It's safe to say that campus activities have faced a life-altering experience that shook us to our core, making the ability to lead from an infinite mindset all the more necessary. We can take the easy route and go back to doing the same things we were doing prior to COVID. Or, we can create a better normal through committing to an infinite mindset and consistently seeking to put all five essential practices reviewed here to work. In particular, if we are courageous, we can avoid replicating campus activities programming that we knew wasn't effective but done out of tradition and re-allocate those resources in a way that promotes student learning and holistic development.

While *The Infinite Game* is a business book by nature, it truly teaches us the importance of not treating higher education as a business. I encourage everyone reading this article to read *The Infinite Game*. Sinek does a wonderful job providing vivid examples in each section that help the reader better comprehend how the concepts discussed above have played out in real situations and emphasizes the positive impact it can have on how one approaches leadership. I also want to explicitly state that, while I use the term used in the book, nothing about our work is a game. Students entrust us with their time and resources, often limited time and resources, and we need to deliver on the promise.

To be resilient is to be "able to endure political, technological, and cultural change," (Sinek, 2019, p. 44). A global pandemic recently required (and continues to require) us to show our resilience. Campus activities across most campuses could not be executed as planned. At a moment's notice, professional staff had to find a way to endure the change and keep connected with students. Whether or not our Just Cause was connected to DEI, it became clear that the transition to remote learning was not equitable. Many of our campus communities attempted to serve students through setting up mobile wifi hotspots in parking lots, securing long-term rentals of laptops to students without access to technology at home, and things of the sort. Most of us did this due to playing the finite game of trying to keep students enrolled. A noble gesture, yes. However, as Kevin Kruger, President of NASPA, put it in a webinar in April 2020, the work we were able to do to secure resources for students who did not have them displayed our lack of promoting equity prior to the pandemic more so than it displayed a gesture that deserves positive recognition (Presence.io, 2020). Playing the infinite game, we need to continue to provide students with activities that help them develop a sense of belonging to our campus community while also being intentional about providing holistic support to students.

Even prior to the global pandemic that altered the landscape of higher education without notice, enrollment trends were not positive at a large percentage of institutions. Trends do not appear to be shifting positively as we are looking at a potential enrollment cliff with a projected 15% decline in enrollment in the year 2025 due to decreasing birth rates in the United States (Kline, 2019). We can learn a great deal from this book by ensuring we do not just focus on the bottom line out of panic but commit to playing the infinite game in a way that will allow us to come out of this crisis better than we went into it. If we in higher education genuinely want to promote equity and be change agents, we must put students first. If we genuinely do this, the metrics will follow because higher education will provide the value that it claims to provide. As higher education institutions are forced to compete for students, campus activities can profoundly impact the future of higher education.

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