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Crystal Lay, PhD: Welcome back to my pax bread and chat podcast, where we highlight cool people who do cool things and talk about cool stuff in resonance life and college student housing. I'm. Your guest host, Crystal Way. I use the she/her series pronouns. And i'm excited to have you here today. Today. We're talking to Dr. Gregory Thompson, who also goes by Dr. G. From time to time, and we're going to talk about the topic of campus politics. This is a topic that I feel is rarely talked about, at least part actively so. I'm very excited to have our guest here to share his knowledge with us. I'll start by having him introduce himself.

Greg Thompson (he/him): Well, thanks, Dr. Crystal. It's a real pleasure to be with you today, so I am Dr. G. But we're going to go by Greg today, because it just seems to make the most sense. So I've been a residence life professional for just over 20 years. I'm. Currently at the University of Iowa, but I've worked at a variety of other institutions through my career as well, too, and just have a real passion about helping younger professionals. Mid level. Folks start to think about how to navigate their careers and think about their own ability to be successful at campus politics and making a difference

Crystal Lay, PhD: that is so great, you know I and listen to you. Time. It's like I've been in the field for a long time, too, and think about the different levels and all the different campus politics I've had to navigate. But I wanted to start by getting into what exactly is campus politics, and I had a colleague that would say it's about shaking hands and kissing babies. But I saw you speak at an event recently, and I thought No, there's more to it. So let's get to Why, you know. What is it? And then what interest you about this particular topic?

Greg Thompson (he/him): Yeah, you know, I think a lot of people's perceptions about politics is centered on the word politics, and what we see in popular culture. And right now I mean a lot of what we see in politics is a lot of disagreement or a lot of power struggle, or a lot of jockeying for position or being able to control decision making processes. And and I think there's elements of that in campus politics. But, like you said, you know, if you boil it down, it is kind of like shaking hands and kissing babies. It's about the relationships we build on campus that allow us to more effectively advocate for students that allow us to advance the work that we want to do in our department that allow us to make the connections on campus that are, allow us to leverage our strengths to be able to either advance our own careers or to be able to think about what we need to be doing departmentally. So it's really relationship based. And I think it's really about how we choose to navigate, show up,

treat people, and also kind of build our own brand and reputation with the folks we're gonna work with on campus.

Crystal Lay, PhD: I like that. There's so many different pieces to it. And so I've worked at lots of institutions, and I found that politics can really vary based on the leadership of the campus. It can be different, based on the state and the laws that are present. And so how do you learn what the politics are of your campus, or maybe more? So just your department.

Greg Thompson (he/him): Yeah, I think a lot of this might say that we've had to learn through trial and error, and sometimes by making mistakes of of trying to figure out what's going on. But I think you really hit the nail on the head. It's really unique, based on the type of institution. And there's a variety of those factors that contribute it to that or to that. So you work at a public institution and right off the bat, You know you're going to have a a bureaucracy in place that's probably dictated by a board governors or a board of trustees probably has some tie-ins with the State legislature that help shape how a campus can respond, or the ways that they're able to go through a change process or or look at doing things on campus. So right off the bat you've got these influences or factors that are even bigger than what you might experience on campus, and you have to have a sense of awareness that that is going to be a part of the the political reality as well, too. Private institution campuses you. You might have a whole different set of factors. Whether you have a religious affiliation that you're working with whether you, you know, may have some trustees that have different expectations, different standards of what the curriculum is going to look like or what's going to be focused on. And so you have to understand kind of those 30,000 foot pieces before you can start to digest how folks on campus navigate that as well. So then, you've got all the variety of different folks that you're gonna have to connect with for a lot of professionals. It starts really locally with your supervisor or the folks that you supervise the staff team that you're a part of. How do they go about making decisions? How do they develop a culture within the department. What are the expectations for showing up at events, or or your presence and meetings? What are the expectations for after our work, whether the expectations around we can work. Does your boss have plans or ideas about how you should show up with campus partners? Does your Vice President have thoughts and opinions on that. And so there are all these different folks with all these different expectations. And so we have to go about trying to figure out one. What are the values of the institution that are dictated by those 30,000 foot factors? And then to what are the expectations of the people that we are most accountable for. Whether that's our supervisors, our staff teams, the students that we represent the parents that we're going to be working with. We have to understand how all of those factors contribute to the culture of a campus before we can know exactly how we're going to navigate those political realms on a campus.

Crystal Lay, PhD: That sounds pretty complex, right? I think you do have to rely on, you know, like you said your supervisor. I'm trying to understand the institutional type you mentioned Board of Trustees. There's so many different factors. If you were talking to a hall director or entry level professional, what are the typical things that they can expect or should be prepared for if you could frame it that way as you think about. Yeah, Well, I think, like you said. It can really seem complex. And I think for a lot of folks when we say campus politics, it feels overwhelming because we have

Greg Thompson (he/him): all those factors that we know contribute. We have all those preconceived notions. But why do I? What I like to tell a lot of young professionals or new staff, is You're already doing this, you do you? You are already engaging in the behaviors that can make you successful at campus politics, because, remember, we're going back to that that key fundamental about this is about relationships. how we build them, and how we choose, and ourselves to show up authentically and sometimes with vulnerability to navigate those relationships. So a lot of that conversation, I think, begins with You know. What are you good at when you're interacting with others? What are your strengths and skills that you bring into play that help You develop the relationships to navigate politics successfully. There's not a secret formula, you know. There's typically not a secret door. You have to unlock to do this. but there are levels of access that you are able to get to based on your political capital that you have based on your position. So, as an entry level hall coordinator, you may not be able to walk into the President's office and say, here's what I think should happen. But you probably have some. Let layers and levers of influence that you can pull, whether that's getting the pulse of what your students are experiencing and passing that up to your supervisor talking with your director or with your Vp. I think a lot of entry level. Folks forget that we are the we are the feed on the ground. We have the pulse of the student body typically because of how much access we have with them. Living on campus as well, too. That's a powerful piece that a lot of decision makers don't have access to, and so that's a tool to be able to use, to navigate, to to be able to to speak as the voice of the students at times when you're in those spaces with administrators or upper level leaders that Don't always have that day to day interaction with students. So that's a simple way, you know, knowing your students knowing what's happening in the building, knowing what they're talking about with. The issues are the pulse on campus, and what's important to them, and then being able to articulate that to supervisors, colleagues folks up the line as well, too. That's an easy way to start to build that reputational capital that gets you more access or gets you to be seen as somebody that's valuable, or has information that can be useful on a campus as well, too.

Crystal Lay, PhD: I think about data and stories, and the more you can

tell the story and create a picture of what's happening with your students or your department that's going to get you in the door, and it's also folks inviting you to the table. I mean. So the more you put yourself out there you have folks advocating for you. I think you are better positioned right to do some of those things. So I really love that. I want to move into. So let's say, now you have figured out the politics, the values. You have a better understanding of how things work. And all of a sudden you're like, oh, misalignment! I I. My values are not in alignment with this department of politics. What do you do? Have you seen that? And how would you help support someone that's in that part of their their journey?

Greg Thompson (he/him): Yeah, I think this happens a lot for folks right, especially with entry level professionals who are excited about some of those first career opportunities and are really starting to learn that working full time. and sometimes the bureaucracy of our institutions isn't always as glamorous as maybe we thought it would be as we're coming out of those grad prep programs, or we're starting to work full time for the first first bit as well, too. So I think a piece that you and I have talked about in the past, is you? You have to ask yourself some hard internal questions, and that really starts with: Is this me? That's not an alignment. Or is it this place? That's not an alignment with me as well, too, I think, because of the institutional presence of a lot of our campuses. We're led to believe that if there's an issue, it's it's about us right. We need to be the ones to adapt. We need to find the pathway through. We're talking about institutions that have had decades and sometimes centuries of ways, that they've done things. And so it can be common for individuals to feel like there's something wrong with me in this place. But that's where you need to dig a little deeper, and that's where you need to. You need to have a good awareness of your own values, or about your own identities. about what you want to get out of the experience of of working in a a college campus as well, too, and then ask, is this really me? Are my values out of alignment? Or is this just the place that i'm in, and either answer can be true, depending on the circumstances. But I think it's important for professionals to remember. It's not always a you issue like. There are places and environments where, because of the political alignment of what's happening on campus or the culture. That you may just find that this isn't the place for you and your values. And I think I like to tell professionals that that's okay. That's that's part of figuring out your own career path. And that's part of figuring out your own voice, and how you're going to advocate for students to be able to say this place, this department. This supervisor may not be in alignment with me, but you know what I think. There are places that will be in alignment with what i'm looking for. And then that's where you can start to have some empowerment of of either job searching or looking to advocate for the changes that help get you back into alignment of your values with an institutional value system as well.

Crystal Lay, PhD: Yeah. And I think sometimes that realization of I might be the person that needs to leave, because this place may not shift, you know it takes a long time to shift culture, and, like you said, there is this historical piece, so it's coming to terms with. I might be making that movement for myself, and hopefully, you know it's a choice you're making as well for you versus someone making it. So I, Greg. I think we've built some pretty good report. That's your signal that this next question goes deep. So we've been feel a long time. I I would wager that we probably have navigated it. You know the field in the world differently because of identities that we hold. I identify as a black woman you identify as a white man, and I would say that there are spaces you go in where you will have more power and influence because of the identities that you hold. So can you talk a little bit about, or a lot about right how identity affects, how someone might navigate campus for departmental politics.

Greg Thompson (he/him): right, and I mean it has to. I W. Our institutions are part of systems that have long held biases, or are part of cultures that have oftentimes engaged in behaviors or oppressive politics that have not been friendly or welcoming, or fair to a variety of identities on our campus. And and yes, I go into spaces as a white man, and have an experience that's quite different than you will have as a black woman as well, too, and I think you know one of the political pieces I like to tell or talk to. A lot of our younger professionals about is. You have to understand that that is a piece of what is happening on campus, both from your own individual identities, and how that shapes, how you get to show up, or where you get to a search your influence in different ways. But also how that impacts those around you as well, too. When I talk about building those relationships about, you know, developing your own values, and a culture that has to be a Po, a a piece that we walk into, especially with folks that have a white identity, or even a male identity like I have. We are are in spaces and places still on a lot of institutions where other folks don't have that piece. And so it it would be a it would be a mistake. It would be a miss for me as a professional, and for other professionals to not recognize and understand that. And then use that opportunity to either call attention to the fact that other identities are not present at the table, or to advocate and speak on the the the issues that we know are impacting folks of a variety of identities on campus as well, too. To ignore, that is, to continue to shut the door for a lot of opportunities to move forward on our campuses, or to engage in a different level of pieces as well, too. So, and then I have to recognize because of my identity. Sometimes I can do that in a way that's less risky than you might be able to crystal in those situations as well, too, because of those identities I hold, and the and the value that some people place on those I I did so I can't sit back If you and I are in the same room, and just expect for you to be able to voice the concerns of black students on campus that has to come out of my mouth as well to If there's gonna be a continued change in the culture of how that is addressed how that

politically navigates on the campus as well, too so! And there are places and campuses where that's easier to do these days, and there are places where that's not. But I really think it's incumbent on all of us as housing professionals to one have that awareness of our own identities, and how they present those spaces, and to to not be afraid to use some of that political capital to show up in ways that challenge the status quo or problematic behaviors as well, too.

Crystal Lay, PhD: I think I've said to you that like I need you to do my work and to make this feel open or create access, and I think that that Coalition building all I ship advocacy is so important, and that's what I heard in your answer. I have been in spaces where I have been expected to talk about the black experience, or be the advocate for an entire group. And so I I like the pieces that you're talking about is that we all have a responsibility to learn how to support our students.

Greg Thompson (he/him): And I just have students, but also our staff and each other. I think that's crucial. Bad political capital, and around issues sometimes related to student identity or race in particular. I've spent some of that capital, and it hasn't been successful, but you have to, because of my personal values and the values I share with the colleagues I work with around those topics. That's a that's a decision that I was ready and willing to make right. And and sometimes you have to do that. Sometimes the spending of capital is not going to result in the positive outcome that you want. But it's important to spend it to put yourself out there, to be able to advance toward the place where hopefully you can impact some meaningful change that doesn't mean it's always going to happen. But again, it's probably much easier for me to spend some of that capital, but it would be for you to put yourself out there in some of those places as well, too, and we need all the voices to to to make those changes possible.

Crystal Lay, PhD: So, going off script, how did you come to You know this understanding or awareness of identity? Are there things that you would recommend, or you know, just where do you start for folks who are wanting to be competent in that area?

Greg Thompson (he/him): It just wasn't something that was always discussed, even in some of my prep programs and some places. I was fortunate to get into some departments where conversations about inclusivity about equity, about justice. We're coming up as well, too. But I think really what I would. What I recommend to folks is, you've got to turn the internal lens at some point and decide that this is an important topic that you need to deconstruct and pursuit. So so for me, that meant attending the Social Justice Training Institute, it meant kind of really diving into my wide identity and starting to pick a part. Some of the things that I learned it meant starting to talk to allies on campus, both at shared my identities and folks that had

identities that were different from mine to begin to do my own learning, my own understanding. And so a a lot of just like a lot of what we've been talking about, Crystal. It's about relationship building, and I also think this is another place where that vulnerability comes into play to to be successful. and and being a political being on campus or to learning about your identities, there's a great deal of vulnerability that comes out of that, I have had to admit to myself. I don't know all the things I had to admit to myself. You know there's probably a lot of examples of problematic things that I've done, you know, maybe unconsciously, because I didn't know about it, but also because of of just how systems are acclimated for me as well, too. So you've got to dive in You've got to have those conversations. and we talk a lot about when we're navigating these political pieces of having, you know, a group of people around you to support you part of what my own process, and that was making sure the people I had around me to support me. That board of directors type were not just folks that looked like me, that were folks that had different experiences that were from different races, different gender identities, different sexual orientations, all those kind of rich tapestry of the folks we have on campus as a leader. I need to be able to have those folks around to process as well, too, and not to give me just the pad on the back, but also to give me the push and the challenge as well. So again, I think it's about building those relationships being vulnerable, vulnerable enough to turn that lens inward, and look at where your learning edges are. and then to be willing to take some risks, to push, learn, grow, and challenge others around you as well.

Crystal Lay, PhD: That is so great, and I think our conversation has been so great, and you've given me a lot to think about. If you could narrow it down to 3 types, takeaways, or maybe Dr. G's top 3 tips to navigate campus politics. What would that be?

Greg Thompson (he/him): Well, you know, Top 3 is hard for me. You know I've got. I've got a top 5, because you know it's always hard for me to narrow down on somebody. So. But I think you know a couple we've already touched on, You know. I think awareness is a really big piece. You have to have some awareness of yourself, how you are able to to show up with folks, navigate these things. But also you have to have that awareness of your surroundings about the folks you're working with the culture and your department, the Co. The culture on your campus. Think about those pieces and be aware you and I've talked before in the past about that politics a lot of times is about the culture of availability. You gotta be showing up. You gotta have some presence. You gotta go to the campus event to make the connections you have to show up in your hall to be present when your your staff are programming, and that gets hard sometimes, because Sometimes I can feel performative, or you you. You're not authentic in ways, but it is just part of the politics of campus people. Need. You need to be seeing. You need to be there as well, too. One of the things that I

talk a lot with my staff and with younger staff in particular, is. you also have to have this acceptance. Some things are going to be out of your reach to control, at least for right now. But what you're trying to do is build a culture or reputation that gets you more capital to be able to influence those so. except that you know there are some things you're not going to be able to change, but celebrate the wins when you are able to get in there and make it as well, too. And then just that adventure and authenticity, Don't. Be afraid, as you start to build up some political capital, to take some risks, to say the thing that maybe is unsaid to push the change or the challenge that you see is necessary. But maybe not. Everybody's quite there yet. We need bold leaders going into the next. You know few decades of housing and residence life. Our Our students have a different expectation for what our institutions are providing, and here we have a lot of folks that are ready to lean in and do that. But there's a lot of folks up the line that that's not always been their experience in the past, so we need folks that can take that risk be authentic, be vulnerable. Bring up the topics that aren't always easy to talk about and not get discouraged when those those frontline forces that have always said no, say no to keep thinking about how to navigate, and then partnering with those folks that are like you as well to getting to those conferences and meeting folks reaching out to those colleagues and making those connections building that support system. That's what we need, and that's what I you know. I hope a lot of professionals can take away is to go out. Be bold and take those chances when when you see them.

Crystal Lay, PhD: and the thread throughout is relationships, it's so much easier to achieve these pieces and be in community when you've built that right, and you build that human and relational capital. We are coming to the end of our time, and if folks wanted to learn more about this topic, where should they start, or the resources that you would recommend?

Greg Thompson (he/him): Yeah, You know, I I think a lot of the resources that have been useful for to me. I just been talking with a lot of folks in the field, or my supervisors that have done this, You know I I I i'm sure there's a lot of of readings that that folks can find on kind of relationship building campus politics. You and I have talked a lot about, you know, being in tune with your strengths thinking about those. And and also I like to really that board of Directors concept who's mentoring you in these relationships, but also Who are you mentoring in these kind of relationships? No matter your number of years of experience, you should be helping to create this political culture as well, too, so authenticity and vulnerability. Bernie Brown has been someone that I've turned to that someone that you resonate with. But go out there, kind of find what it speaks to you. I don't think that there's one size fits all for learning how to navigate, and to to to move boldly as well, too. So Many of the listeners of this podcast probably could send out the recommendations



of those influencers that they're following the articles they're reading. There's a lot of pieces that can be inspirational for you to follow along with as well.

Crystal Lay, PhD: This was such a great conversation, and also a great professional development. Thank you so much, Dr. Gregory Thompson for joining me today, and thanks for joining us on this episode of res, add chat. If you have an idea of a topic or a person you'll like us to have on the show. Please let us know my reaching out to impact and take care.

Greg Thompson (he/him): Thanks so much.