

A Conversation with Sharitta Gross-Smith Assistant Director of Programmatic Initiatives and Student Development at RIT'S Multicultural Center for Academic Success.

Facilitated by Luke Auburn

Luke Auburn: You're listening to the RIT Professional Development podcast. I am your host Luke Auburn. Today's guest is Sharitta Gross-Smith: Assistant Director of Programmatic Initiatives and Student Development at RIT's Multicultural Center for Academic Success. She started her career at RIT in 2007 as a career services coordinator in the office of Career Services and Cooperative Education. Outside of her formal work at RIT she volunteers and serves on the boards for numerous organizations and nonprofits. Including the WDKX Women for Women Event on the programming and planning committee, and NextStepU. We'll talk a little bit about her journey and advice for others forging their own career path. Sharitta thank you for joining us.

Sharitta Gross-Smith: Thank you for having me, I appreciate the opportunity.

Luke Auburn: So you recently made a career shift. And took a new position at RIT. What was the incentive for you to make this change? And how do you handle the emotions that surround making a career move?

Sharitta Gross-Smith: It's an interesting question. After being in the position for about eight years, and being afforded many opportunities to grow, expand, and do things that I didn't even know I could do until I was asked to do them. I realized that I needed to kind of branch out a little bit more in regards to my work with students. My prior role was heavily steeped in being student centered. I counseled students in career development, looking for a co-op was part of that career development. As well as worked with alumni as it related to the same thing. And so I do miss that portion of my work, it was very layered. So I would say that it was three part, my prior job that is. I did career counseling, workshop development and facilitation, and employer relations. My current position doesn't really involve a lot of employer relations. Nor does it involve working with alumni. But it really offers the opportunity for me to have a more intimate rapport with RIT students. So I really had to think about my trajectory professionally, and what would allow me to get the skills that I needed in order to go into leadership. And my current position I believe facilitates that.

Luke Auburn: So this allows you to sort of take a deeper dive in that one area?

Sharitta Gross-Smith: Yes. So this role is more focused on -- as the title says programmatic initiatives. So it focuses more on program development. Which really gives me a little bit more of an opportunity to create some things from scratch. That could become signature programs. And those things are ironically developed based upon our student's needs. So either in conversations with them. Or by setting out a clipboard survey, which is really awesome because a lot of times I think in higher education we create programming thinking that we know what the students need, based upon what we might've seen historically. And some of those things are factual when you do benchmarking etc... However every student is different, and the students at RIT are different from those at U of R, different from those at Rutgers. So I think this really affords an opportunity to really tap into what the students need, and what's going to help them to grow and develop both academically and personally. So being able to create those programs to address those needs is a really -- it's a great opportunity.

Luke Auburn: It sounds like it. Now that you've made this shift in jobs, how does that impact your professional development plan? Are there new skills that you've identified that you hope to acquire or develop? Or are you still in the process of feeling your way around the new position?

Sharitta Gross-Smith: I guess I want to go back to your other question before I answer the second set. You asked about handling the emotional piece of making a career move. I think that was really important, and actually imperative when you're looking at growing as a person or as a professional is to understand that shift happens. There was an "f" in there. [chuckle] Because if you don't, it becomes really difficult for you to grow. If you stay stagnant out of fear. If you feel like you don't want to -- you know at this point I don't want to be the new kid on the block. Much like if parents become empty-nesters. And all of a sudden now there's going to be another child, and now you have to start all over again. But there's a beauty in that child. There is a gift in that right? So it's the same thing I think that happens when you have a rebirth with your career, or there's a shift. And after doing the same job for eight years, and having different experiences therein, I did have some fear. You know about coming in, and being the new girl. But what I had to realize is that I was still going to be involved and working with the thing I enjoy the most, which is RIT students. And thankfully I already had a rapport with almost everyone in this office before I set foot into MCAS. So I think that how I dealt with it was pulling upon the pre-existing relationships that I had in the division and at MCAS. As well as understanding that in order for me to grow, there's going to have to be a shift. And that might be uncomfortable, but the best way to adapt is to jump in with both feet. But to go back to your question about now that I've made a shift in jobs how does that impact my plan? It doesn't really impact it that much. I think that you know there's again going to a little bit of a shift in how different things are accomplished. Because I am in the process of getting my doctorate degree. So I think that the shift will come, as far as timing and what I'm able to do and really stepping up my time management and project management skills. So there's the impact, because this job is different. For example this office does a Summer Bridge Program, which is a four week intensive program. So although at my last job I did work throughout the summer, this is different because it's going to be working in the summer on the weekends. So there will be a shift in how I manage my time as far as when I'm doing my research, when I'm studying, and also when I'm

actually developing programming. So that shift has happened because I came into this role in November. Which is ironically kind of a peak season for us, because we're trying to start planning for the spring. So I had to think strategically and say: "Okay what I need to do is to plan for the spring and start planning for the summer as well at the same time. So that I won't feel rushed, and as we all know at RIT space is very limited and it's like really in high demand." So I started planning early as soon as I got in my 30-60-90 day plan was including getting all the workshops done, or at least reserving the space.

Luke Auburn: You mentioned briefly the doctorate program that you're pursuing. Can you tell me what that is? And how you identified a program that met your goals and what you needed?

Sharitta Gross-Smith: When I chose the program which is the EDD program: A Doctorate of Education and Executive Leadership at St. John Fisher. I chose a program that would not conflict with work. And this particular program takes place every other Friday and Saturday. So Fridays from 5:30 to 9:30 PM, and on Saturdays from 9 to 5. On the outset that sounds pretty easy. But when you're not in class you're reading with every inch of your being. And you're writing with every inch of your being. And you know there's just so many different assignments in between. But I really was looking for a program that would not conflict, rather that would really align or dovetail with my work. I also want to choose a program that would allow flexibility for me professionally. I think that you have to have more than one avenue that you can take professionally. Essentially so to speak, you can't just be a one trick pony. You can't just be a career services coordinator. And that's all you do is counseling. Unless your goal is perhaps to lead a career center. And that's the path that you decide to take. But there are many paths to get to leading a career center, or becoming a president of a University, or becoming a VP in a corporate setting. So what I wanted was a degree that would allow me to go into different sectors. Whether it was the government, which is also another specialty area of mine. Or going into higher-ed which I obviously have a passion for. Or going into the nonprofit arena which is where I've done a lot of my volunteerism.

Luke Auburn: And so versatility is really key?

Sharitta Gross-Smith: Yes.

Luke Auburn: You've worked for a while at RIT. You've had experience at other places as well. What do you say the most important steps you've taken towards advancing your career are?

Sharitta Gross-Smith: Networking is very important. And I think in order to network effectively you have to be fearless. I often have talked about that with some of my friends. And we talked about recently: introvert versus extrovert, and I call myself a selective extrovert, because actually I'm quite shy. But my job has taught me that when you go to conferences, when you're meeting with a student, when you're

meeting with -- I'm speaking about prior work now when I was working at RochesterWorks, when you have somebody sitting in front of you that say has worked at Kodak their entire life and now they have had the rug pulled from under them. You have to be intuitive, aware and engaging. You can't be introverted if you're going to be in the field of human services. So part of what I had to learn is how to network with people and how to step outside of my comfort zone. Because by way of networking you learn about different things that you may not have learned about otherwise. And I think when stepping out of your comfort zone, you learn certain things that you might not have been able to pick up on if you just stay within your own sphere of comfort. So networking can also assist with different things like what I do now: workshops. So I'm looking at the workshops that I'm doing for the MCAS Scholars Program that I oversee. And I do six workshops every semester. So I'm thinking about: Okay I want somebody to talk about public speaking and how to do that. Or the power of networking and think about who do I know? So I have six workshops and I'm only facilitating one of them. Why? Because I've networked and I know people that have certain skill sets that they're willing and gracious enough to impart to me, the MCAS scholars. So networking can help in so many different ways. But you have to be fearless in doing that. And not be afraid to walk up to somebody and say: "Hi my name is Sharitta Gross-Smith, I work at RIT." Or to tell someone: "You know I'm really interested in learning more about X because I don't really know how to do that." So in some cases it might require a little bit of humility, you have to be willing to learn. In order to be a good leader, I think you have to actually learn how to be a good follower. The student can become the teacher, but you have to be willing to learn first.

Luke Auburn: Earlier I mentioned briefly some of the nonprofit organizations that you're involved with. How do you think volunteer and charity work plays a role in professional development? How has that helped you along your path?

Sharitta Gross-Smith: I think that sometimes we limit ourselves by what we're allowed to do within our professional roles. When I mean by that is, there are some confines -- or there's something confining about the steps that you might be able to take in a professional environment. There are certain steps that might be put in place, you know you could be a counselor, and then from a counselor maybe senior counselor, so on and so forth. So you might not be able to readily access certain skills you might need to go into leadership, if you desire to do so. For me I would love to go into leadership. And certain things that are needed, such as being able to manage a budget, supervising people, really having the ability to do public speaking. So all those things I was able to do by volunteering. For example when I was with YWCA on their board, I had the great opportunity to lead a committee and to assist in the coordination of one of their largest Empowering Women Luncheons ever that featured Susan Taylor. It allowed me to see what the budget was, and to supervise my committee. So I hadn't yet been able to do that professionally. But volunteering allowed me to get that experience supervising people and budgets. And it also can lend to you getting credibility and being able to do those things and give you transferable skills. So for me it helped me to acquire skills that I didn't have professionally because my job didn't lend to those things being in play. But it also gave me some credibility to where I was sought out after YWCA, to help with organizing other things. So my Advanced Certificate in Project Management from RIT has been put into use over and over again. So working in the community, the spirit of servant hood can teach you so much, and allow so many opportunities to come forward. So again for me it really allowed

me to acquire skills that I might not have otherwise acquired during that time in my professional life. But it also expanded my network. Because I got to talk to people that said: "Oh you organized this event, can you help us with this?"

Luke Auburn: So throughout your career have you had any key figures that you look to as mentors or role-models? Who do you admire and why?

Sharitta Gross-Smith: I would say first and foremost my main role model would be my late grandmother Eloise Wade. And she was a role model to me because of her spirit of servant hood and her resilience. She had seven children, six boys one daughter. So that alone requires a lot of patience and resilience and many a prayer. But I think that there are also other people that I've looked to, to assist me in looking at my trajectory. And I think it's important to have mentors. I have to say that it's important to have more than one. So I have several mentors from different walks of life. And so I can tell you a few of them. One of them is Dr. Leslie Myers. She's a Superintendent of Schools at Brockport. And as a woman of color she's just a trailblazer. And she's very fearless in her leadership, she pushes herself. And she strives for the best for her students. So she really I think demonstrates student centeredness in everything that she does. But at the same time she's a good friend, and a good daughter. So I look at her as a role model because of that work life balance that I see because we're also really good friends as well. My eighth grade social studies teacher is another person that I look to. She took a path less traveled in acquiring her degree to be able to teach. She was a nun, she never had children but her students were her children. And she taught until she couldn't teach anymore. And she is now retired and she really was an intuitive individual. She could tell when something was wrong with her students, and they don't make teachers like that anymore. There's some great teachers out there. But just her intuitiveness was just really unique. And how she was able to tap into her students. But she also brought culture into her classroom. She's Irish and every St Patty's Day she would dance a jig for her class. And we were always like she's going to break her hip, she's going to break her hip this time. But you know this was the way that she brought in culture. And her care, her genuine concern for her students is something that I really admired. And she's part of the reason why I decided to teach. And so I was able to teach for about six years at MCC as an adjunct professor.

Luke Auburn: It's always fascinating to hear where people find their inspiration. So in your previous position you spent a lot of time coaching young people as they began to pursue their careers. What advice would you give someone who's just starting to think about their own career development?

Sharitta Gross-Smith: I would say the first thing you want to do perhaps is to go on to a web site called O*NET. So it's O asterisk N E T. This web site is great for a variety of reasons. It's a very versatile in the resources that are available. When you put a particular job title -- So think about what you want to do. You would put that job title into the search box on O*NET and it will actually tell you the typical task that a person does. So that's something that can actually be used in your resume. You can take some of

those tasks, and as appropriate integrate them into your resume. And I always tell people because I'm an educator: "It's not plagiarism it's a public resource." And you're just taking it and adjusting the tenses to present or past tense as appropriate and putting them into your resume to kind of give yourself some leverage. As it relates to being a competitive applicant. When you continue to look at the results that you get on O*NET depending on the position you put into the search box. It will also tell you the type of education that's required. The job outlook, the average salary. You can even hit a certain button and do a job outlook for another state. Because the reality is -- Again this is why I think you have to be versatile when you're pursuing education. When you're looking at career options, relocating may be a necessity. Rochester is a great city but it's also small depending on what sector you want to go into. So if you want to look at California, Philadelphia, Boston -- you can do that actually on O*NET and see what the outlook and the average salary is for the occupations that you're interested in. So I would say to look at a resource like O*NET first to find out what kind of education is required? What is the job outlook for this? Will you actually have employment in ten years that will be available to you in this state that you're interested in residing in? Also I would look at what kinds of things you can do to better align yourself with those sectors of employment. If you go onto the Career Services and Co-op Education web site, there are actually resources there to help you. And it's labeled as: What would you do? Or what can I do with a major in? Their web site is chock-full of different guides and resources to assist you in your career development, and I think that that's important to see as well. Because this particular section on their web site will take you to a page that talks about different things you can do to start to align yourself with resources or career tracks as you might be interested in.

Luke Auburn: Sharitta it's been a pleasure. Thank you for your time. That concludes another edition of the RIT Professional Development podcast series. For more information on how you can develop your career visit RIT.edu/CPD.