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Why I Left Student Affairs and How I Hope to Return

Christy Anthony

A career spent in student affairs is a demanding journey, often requiring heavy commitments of time and emotional energy. Although the rewards of such a career are significant, many student affairs educators (SAEs) leave the profession, often citing overwhelming challenges of work-life balance. I once believed my own commitment to my SAE profession was unshakable. However, after more than a decade, family matters pushed me to leave the field; hopefully, this will be temporary. This article addresses questions I have pondered daily in the intervening months, wondering about the values and demands for careers and lives well lived, as well as a work environment that would support such balance. This article also challenges SAEs to consider how our students learn from our own choices about work-life balance.

How and Why I Left Student Affairs

After working in student affairs for more than a decade, I left the field in 2014. My resume describes June 2014 to January 2015 as “[f]amily and elder care leave.” Those five words gloss over the daily questions about whether the changing priorities of my family life resonate with the values of my profession. What do I need for a life well lived? What emotional capacities does student affairs work demand? What do I teach my students as I navigate between these two questions? When I return to the field, what environment might be manageable?

During the 2013-2014 academic year, I concluded a Semester at Sea voyage and temporarily filled in for colleagues on family-leave while conducting a permanent job search. Although I longed for a “home” campus, I had also found a balanced lifestyle in this sojourn approach to employment. Because I had less committee work or “other duties as assigned,” I was able to devote more time to personal pursuits. However, I also missed the familiarity and rhythm of a campus community that had sustained me throughout the daily demands of student affairs. During this interlude, I evaluated the exchange of a working community for personal time.

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This interlude vanished as, within four months, my parents each experienced severe health crises and my daughter was born. I abandoned considerations of balance for cancer care, financial management of two households, death arrangements for one parent, mental health care for a surviving parent, and the joyous struggles of new parenthood. I lacked time to meet the demands of most SAE roles. Moreover, emotional energy spent in grief and parenting meant I had none left for work. After assessing the demands of my career, the needs of my family, and my resources, I quit SAE work entirely and immediately. This decision was possible in part due to my financial and marital privilege, but I cried over the resignation. As demanding as SAE work was, resigning meant I surrendered the spirit and community I had found in my career. I assumed I would return when my life achieved a new normal.

Doubting a Return

The new normal has come and I am still evaluating if, when, and how I should return to work as an SAE. The demands on my personal life have steadied, but not vanished. I wonder if the unpredictable life of an SAE leaves enough time for my personal responsibilities and desires. I know the attrition rate among SAEs can be as high as two-thirds (Evans, 1998), and higher still for those like myself who identify as a working mother (Anderson, Guido-DiBrito, & Morrell, 2000; Evans, 1988; Levtoy, 2001). Statistics such as these intimidate me. I have been nervous to even articulate these fears aloud. Will my professional commitment be doubted? Will my career be “mommy-tracked?” Can I even do this work? I know of others who silently experience the same concerns. This speaks volumes about our profession.

In 2012, nearly a third of U.S. workers were providing some elder care. This number is likely to increase (Family Caregiver Alliance, 2012). Most SAEs know of someone who has left the profession because of “the inability to balance personal and work commitments” (Beeny, Guthrie, Rhodes, & Terrell, 2005, p.143). As parenting expectations spread beyond women and the baby boomer population ages, many who do not identify with the label “working mother” will find themselves facing pressing family demands. Moreover, such obligations should not be the only commitments that merit work-life balance.

I want to be invested in my work life. However, I know that SAE work does not always invest in the lives of its professionals. SAEs are professional caregivers who may not fully understand or value care-giving responsibilities in personal lives.

Are the Demands of SAE Work Culture Manageable?

The Emotional Demands on SAEs

The most salient reason for my resignation from SAE work was that I spent all my emotional energy in family care. I did not have enough time or empathy to give to students. Hours with individuals in sexual assault cases, late nights with students who recently experienced a roommate's death, and meetings with parents to whom I had given terrible news have all tested my emotional availability throughout my career. SAEs have met such emotional demands through decades of budget cuts that have reduced staff and increased the emotional and logistical workload (Berwick, 1992; Levto, 2001; Linder, 2011). The emotional toll amid diminished resources intersects with other social issues like racism, classism, discrimination based on sexual orientation, and bias toward undocumented students.

SAEs must engage in emotional management work for themselves (Schneck, 2013), but given the unpredictable demands of the profession, I question when SAEs might make time for such emotions. This work is best done with intentionality and without demands of efficiency (Linder, 2011). SAEs perceive a need for 50-60 hour work weeks (Beeny et al., 2005; Levto, 2001), leaving little time for predictable, sanctioned, and sacrosanct time away. We know this and advise students to take this time, but our professional expectations and limited budgets often do not support this for ourselves.

The Need for Structural Change

The demands of SAE professional life, although enriching, leaves me no space for emotional nourishment unless structural change happens. My home life has already committed to this change. My partner and I discussed the challenge of emotional management combined with exhausting new parenthood. My sibling and I regularly revisit how to structure elder care responsibilities. While many SAEs attempt to schedule their parenthood at convenient times during the academic year (Levto, 2001), I lived the reality that neither childcare nor eldercare were able to adjust such demands in a student affairs lifestyle. We have heard this cry for structural change in the profession before.

Many colleagues hide these struggles from our students and colleagues alike (Beeny et al., 2005; Levto, 2001), with unknown costs to the employer and employee. In my decision to leave SAE work, I experienced the culture of overwork as a cultural war I did not want to fight and lose. As one example, career consultants have advised me to emphasize the elder care aspects of my personal leave and downplay the childcare because elder care sounds "more sudden and less like it will continue to be a drain on the employer." I have even wondered if my decision

to publicly write about this anxiety over balance is a decision to jeopardize future career opportunities.

Budgeting Emotional Expenditures and Time as an SAE

I have debated if SAE work is best left to those with minimal family responsibilities. However, in child and elder care, I have learned medical advocacy skills, how to prioritize among multiple life and death decisions, emotional management for long term sustainability, and more discernment than my five years of Jesuit SAE work could teach. I yearn to use those skills, even as I fear the work that needs said skills the most.

As my emotional threshold expands in this new normal, I am tempted to spend those additional emotional resources in the SAE roles that connect me with challenges of developing adults. I am also tempted to guard that surplus emotional reserve and keep it for the crises that lurk just behind anyone caring for a small child or an aging parent. As emotionally costly as working with developing adults is, SAE work is also among the most fulfilling ways I spend my time. When SAEs find the right balance, the emotional expenditures pay emotional dividends (Beeny et al., 2005; Berwick, 1992).

The rewarding balance seems to be elusive from the beginning of SAE careers. A new professional once asked me how she would know when to leave the office at the end of the day. Waiting until “work was done” meant she would never go home, but such an attitude was the model available in her office. I told her I leave when the office closes, exempting an event or work that must be done before the next business day. I no longer have the capacity to work unplanned extra hours or use my evenings to catch up. I have also seen that the reward for dedicating extra time is an expectation that I will continue to dedicate extra time.

In some offices, my boundary would be blasphemy (Linder, 2011), but if we are going to sustain diverse people in student affairs, we need to role model that work alone cannot compose a whole life. Anne Katherine, a mental health professional, defined a boundary as that which protects “the integrity of your day, your energy and spirit, the health of your relationship, the pursuits of your heart” (Katherine, 2000, p.14). As an SAE, a parent, a spouse, and an elder care provider, drawing these boundaries challenges me because all of these roles are pursuits of my heart.

What Can Students Learn from SAE Work-Life Balance Efforts?

We Can Teach an Authentic Struggle

I used to assign a values clarification exercise to students who demonstrated what I called “a pattern of non-reflective decision-making.” They began with stating what they valued most in life. For the next week, they tracked the commitments where they spent time, money, and energy. At the end of the week, they assessed and accounted for areas of discrepancy and congruency between their stated values and their expenses.

As I imagine doing this exercise in my life, congruencies need to outweigh discrepancies, and I need to be honest about the discrepancies I do have. This is for my own good and the good of my family, but also for the good of my students. If we teach our students nothing else, we need to teach them the complexities of an authentic life. In my best moments, I will teach self-care and boundary setting. In my worst but honest moments, I will at least teach how to think about the challenges of balance, rather than denying that they exist.

We Can Teach a Journey of Self-Care for Ourselves and Our Students

In maintaining 50-60 hours work weeks, we teach ourselves and our students that we should devote 50% of waking time and energy to work. In never passing a crisis to a colleague to manage, we teach students dependence on an individual, not a caring community or themselves. If everything is a crisis, as some students believe with our support, then no one can distinguish a true crisis from a beneficial challenge. If we set no boundaries around our personal lives, we teach that students are the center of our world. The renowned dedication of SAEs as helping professionals is turning us into helicopter parents with our students as over-coddled children.

Professionally, Schneck (2013) offered a three-pronged alternative to manage within SAE work: (a) mandated counseling, as expected for mental health professionals, (b) acceptance that our role excludes providing therapy, and (c) establishing boundaries. The prescriptions are remarkably similar in my professional and personal responsibilities. I need to invest in and cross train with the village of relationships that is raising my child and caring for my parent. I need to mandate my own mental health care. I need to limit my role—I am not a nurse, therapist, or professional childcare provider. I also need to become comfortable with the idea that the lurking possibility of health and family crises will always lurk. Authenticity demands that I acknowledge balance will always be a work-in-progress. For me, the question remains whether an SAE career is the right studio for that art.

Conclusion: How Might I Return to SAE Work?

An Environment at Peace with Work-Life Balancing Acts

As I seek to return to SAE work, I hope for an environment where

[o]ptions such as flextime, part-time work, and job sharing may allow administrators more time to devote energy to family concerns such as caring for children or aging parents. Additionally, more realistic job expectations, including realistic time demands, may increase the job satisfaction . . . by all. (Anderson, Guido-DiBrito, & Morrell, 2000, p. 106)

I am seeking professional leadership and supervision that prioritizes wellness, not just because it is good for us, but because it is good for our students (Beeny et al., 2005; Berwick, 1992). I want to see these creative solutions not just mentioned, but incorporated flexibly across personnel, regardless of title, parent status, or on-call job elements.

Too often I have been told that working part-time or telecommuting, even one day a week, is “impossible in this work” or will be career-ruining. Structural solutions like part-time work and job sharing have been proposed for more than two decades (Beeny et al., 2005; Berwick, 1992; Levtoy, 2001), suggesting that we know how to fix the problem of wellness and balance in our profession. Perhaps the problem is stubborn because, like our personal lives, we decline to prioritize it, both as a profession and as individuals.

Making Room

When I returned to work in January 2015, it was to higher education, but not to student affairs. A colleague commented, “You would be a great dean of students.” I felt a surge of pride, until he finished, “Oh, but you are doing the mom thing.” Some colleagues were rightly horrified, but no one acknowledged that this idea might accurately reflect our profession’s values. For me, the real frustration from this comment was that my colleague assigned this career decision to my identity as a female parent, ignoring my commitments of elder care or any wish for general wellness.

As I wade into the search for my next professional role, my choice to mention elder care and child care leave on my résumé is way of testing the waters. As a candidate, I will pay attention to whether or not employers give me room to speak about that choice. Some career coaches advised that “no one will ask about those, because it is personal.” I hope I will not be evaluated solely on that choice, but I value employers who demonstrate that this story can be a contribution. If I thought

the choice irrelevant to my career, I would leave it off my résumé.

As a candidate, I am listening for statements about the diversity of families in the office, flexibility of work schedules, and leaders who value that for themselves. When a job description indicates the possibility of flexible work time, I consider it more fully. When a potential employer returns an email at 10 p.m., my alarm bells go off. If a potential colleague mentions that they work four days a week, I breathe more easily. I look for these options because I want to return to doing the work that is a pursuit of my heart. For over a decade, the SAE world gave me a professional home and a community of colleagues. As I nervously step back in, I hope the profession can make just a little more room, so I can do the parent-child-spouse-life thing too.

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