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Stacey A. Miller

Valparaiso University, stacey.miller@valpo.edu

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Easier Said Than Done: Practicing Self-Care and Health and Wellness in Higher Education and Student Affairs

Stacey A. Miller

Our field praises self-care, but does little to support this in our daily work [but] the reality is we are responsible for taking care of ourselves and making time to do this. [While] individuals do not want to [appear] to be selfish, I believe it is [the act of selfishness that] will sustain our energy to remain in this field.

—Iesha G. Valencia, HESA is Hard Shit: Thank You For Helping Me Make It Through Disappointment

On the night of October 31, 2013, my life forever changed. While sitting in a hotel room preparing to return home from a conference I was not surprised to see my phone ring; it was coincidentally Halloween night on a college campus. I answered the phone flippantly, “what is it now,” expecting my staff member to laugh and begin to tell me some ridiculous story about something students were involved in on campus that evening. Instead, I was greeted by a trembling voice “her house is on fire.” “What! Whose house?” I exclaimed. They responded, “Kathy’s house, Kathy’s house is on fire.”

Dr. Stacey Miller currently serves as the Assistant Provost for Inclusion at Valparaiso University in Northwest Indiana. Formerly, she served as the Director of Residential Life in the Division of Student Affairs at the University of Vermont, a position she has held from 2003 to 2015. She is also the co-founder and managing partner for the Consortium for Inclusion and Equity (CIE), LLC, a small firm that specializes in integrated diversity education and consulting.

Over the course of her career she has served as both an administrator in student affairs, and course instructor for the Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) program. She is nationally recognized for her work with affirmative recruitment of diverse staff, and educational trainings and workshops on diversity and inclusion. She is also sought out for her knowledge and growing expertise in the use of Restorative Practices in collegiate residential settings.

Stacey Miller received her doctorate of Education in Leadership and Policy Studies from the College of Education and Social Services at the University of Vermont. She currently lives in the town of Essex Vermont, twenty minutes outside of Burlington, with her family, wife Dr. Harriet Williams, son Jelani, and daughter Taylor.

The tragic events of that night would unfold day-to-day and week-to-week over the course of several months. The house that was on fire was the University owned residence of Associate Director, long-time colleague, and friend, Dr. Kathy Cook, who by means of a self-inflicted gun shot wound had taken her own life, jerry rigging her home to burn down simultaneously. For many her death was a complete and utter shock, confusing, and heartbreaking. Unfortunately, few knew that Kathy was battling deep depression for several months prior to her death, which ultimately lead to her hospitalization and eventual release; only to find means to complete suicide. It was the first time in my 43 year-old life that I experienced something so heartbreaking by someone so close to me.

In the days and weeks after her death, our university, the Division of Student Affairs, and the Department of Residential Life were inundated with emails, cards, visits, food, and words of condolences for the loss of our colleague and friend, meant to help temper the pain we were all experiencing; each of us dealing with our heartache in different ways. This tragedy began to make many of us question our own self-care, health, and wellness, leaving us looking for answers to irreconcilable questions. How could this have happened; why didn't more of us know she was struggling; and why would someone so loved, by so many, take her own life?

The proof text at the beginning of this piece, an excerpt from a higher education student affairs comprehensive paper authored by of one of our former graduate students, perfectly exemplifies the underlying message of why self-care and health and wellness are so difficult to navigate for many in the profession of student-affairs. Only in her mid-twenties, Iesha Valencia had already begun to understand and eloquently explain one of the hardest lessons that professionals in our field struggle with: the ability to practice self-care and good health and wellness.

Finding balance and engaging in self-care is a necessity in the field of higher education and student affairs, as our occupation requires daily and constant interaction with people from all walks of life, backgrounds, and life experiences; each of whom brings with them a unique set of expectations, wants, and needs related to their special role at the institution. Students, faculty, and staff weave a complicated web of interactions and conversations that we all hope will lead to students matriculating to graduation with not only a degree, but also inspiration to become tomorrow's leaders. Faculty and staff also experience the intrinsic value of helping young people achieve their goals, often maintaining special relationships beyond graduation, which serve to connect us to our vocation and our desire to serve. Unfortunately, and all too often, each of us individually and collectively get caught up in the day-to-day minutia of our work and families, overlooking one of the most important aspects of our duties: taking care of ourselves.

In my mid forties, I have found that self-care and balance are two of the most difficult and elusive skills to master, especially for those living in Western societies. Fueled by the demands of consumerism and free market enterprise, every industry, including higher education, is operating like a business, competing daily for its “customers” and own survival. Unfortunately, with these pressures come the increasing demands on an individual’s personal time that cannot be refuted. We are each like a cog in the clock of life, being propelled and turned by a system, that if not careful will grind us down until our spokes are worn and no longer able to spin. And like a cog, we are easily replaceable, as there is always another part waiting in the wings to replace our broken one.

But there is no magic pill or secret potion for learning how to take care of oneself. Iesha stated it best when she said, “I believe self-care is a form of professional development, and that in order to be able to deal with the many situations that will be disappointing we must have the capability of focusing on ourselves. Self-care should not to be confused with egotism, which I believe is the primary reason why it is difficult to overcome the stigma that self-care is egotism, and thus a selfish act” (Valencia, 2009, p. 44). I agree with Iesha in her belief that self-care is misunderstood. For those who have ever been on a plane, one of the most important instructions given as part of the safety demonstration is to put your mask on first before you assist others. The simple and implicit message of that statement is you cannot care for anyone else before you ensure your own safety; and to take care of oneself is not selfishness, but a genuine skill that is learned over time. It is one that I have had to learn at great personal expense and sacrifice and only after years of self-neglect and pain.

For women like me, who hold leadership roles both at home and at work, it is hard to step away from the many “hats” I wear as a spouse, parent, daughter, sister, aunt, teacher, friend, advisor, counselor, advocate, mentor, supervisor, colleague, and consultant without at times feeling like I am letting someone down, or disappointing others; even when I am in great pain and struggling to find my own balance. This is the health and wellness conundrum that currently plagues our society, the balancing act between taking care of self and taking care of others.

Kathy Cook faced that dilemma too. My colleague and friend was an amazing person, who in the short time I had gotten to know her had gone through many life transformations. Through her own self-exploration she began to understand and own her White privilege, becoming one of the most dedicated social justice and White allies I had ever met. She was brilliant in her ability to name social dynamics and hold her peers and students accountable for their unconscious prejudices and racial biases. She also enjoyed an extended period of sobriety, personal, and professional clarity. She had reached out to old friends and even reconciled with family members who she had lost contact with. Most pertinent

to my life, I got to watch her build powerful relationships with colleagues and students, mentoring them and advising them through the trials and tribulations of their own lives. And while she was able to give in abundance to others, she held her own pain, heartache, and despair hidden from most; and although she felt alone, she was not.

For too long, the field of student affairs has paid lip service to the notion of self-care. We talk about it, complain that we do not have enough of it, but do very little to truly change the status quo, or promote healthy lifestyles within our own organizations or institutions. Even today, while our student affairs associations sponsor knowledge communities and task forces of almost every kind, it is only in the last several years that they have begun to explore and try to unravel the mystery of supporting and genuinely promoting the health and well-being of not just students, but the professionals who serve them. Even more importantly, vice presidents, deans, and associate and assistant vice presidents need to learn how to better convey the ever growing complexity of our profession and the increasing demands that are being placed on staff at all levels by students and their families. Leadership needs to learn how to advocate for more resources that support the staff members who serve in these high stress-carrying positions.

Support from leadership can start with the simple acknowledgement that our colleges and universities operate on different clocks and time. In order to meet the needs of students and have the ability to truly interact, manage, and support their social and interpersonal well-being, some student affairs professionals, specifically those in the units of residential life and housing, student activities, fraternity and sorority life, and off campus relations, often work well past five into the long evening hours to establish rapport and meaningful connections with students. These professionals are not traditional administrators and as such deserve the ability to flex their time in ways that allow for better self-care and life balance. Not just in word, but in true action. I have heard plenty of leaders say that they allow their staff to “flex” their time, but then infringe on that practice when they experience pressure from above. I say this as both a perpetrator and victim of this behavior.

Flex time is often usurped by the stressors of the traditional administrative clock that is lived out by higher levels of institutional leadership, who when stressed by difficult communications from a student’s parent or family members, or legal communications demand immediate responses and/or follow up to difficult and complicated situations. Unfortunately, these requests for information or follow up almost always happen after a student affairs first responder has already been up all night dealing with the issue or crisis, and is working hard to rest and recover.

This clock also needs to be clarified for other administrators who work side-by-side with those non-traditional staff members. Even within the same departments or working areas, those who work traditional 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. workdays often resent their “non-traditional clock” colleagues for coming to work at 10:00 a.m. instead of 8:00 a.m. or taking extended lunches. They see these behaviors as unnecessary or preferential, failing to acknowledge that these differences exist because of the late night, weekend, and/or additional work hours and emergency response duties some professions perform as part of their normal work expectations. But make no mistake those resentments are palpable for “non-traditional clock” staff members. Residence directors, coordinators, and graduate assistants often feel that resentment, second guessing their need for self-care and rest out of fear and guilt; choosing to forgo their own health and well-being by coming in early, staying late, and/or putting in more hours than is required or healthy. Conversations about the work “clock” are long over due and need to be explicitly confronted at all levels of the institution along with clarified expectations around the importance of flex time and how it is managed within department.

Student affairs should also consider taking a page out of the counseling profession “play book” by encouraging and in some cases even requiring staff to take “mental health days.” Mental health days, especially those that are mandated, can provide student affairs professionals with guilt free encouragement to be away from the office, to read, exercise, or one of the most basic, but radical notions of self-care—sleep. Mental health days ensure leadership that their staff members are making some effort to take care of themselves and recharging their emotional battery; all things that when timed right have the potential to rejuvenate mind, body, and spirit.

In navigating the death and loss of my colleague and friend Kathy Cook, I can honestly say that there are very few days that pass where I do not think about her. Her absence has left a significant void in my life; and as I continue to process through her death. I have been through all of the stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) more than once. But I believe there is a sixth stage that many of us venture to in solitude, and that is one of curiosity. While I am resolute in my belief that she is safe and happy in another spiritual dimension, it does not make me miss her less, or wonder how her life would have continued to unfold if still here. I am constantly left to wonder-what if? What if I had had been more aware of the signs of her emotional decline; what if I had been more intrusive in my support; and was there something else I could have said or done that would have made a difference in her still being here? These are questions that I know I will ask myself the rest of my life, but will never find answers to; however, they are also the questions that will continue to inform how I live, learn, and take care of myself and others moving forward.

The truth is, we must force ourselves, and the people around us, to take care of ourselves, first by taking an introspective look at our own lives, making necessary changes to take better care of ourselves, and role modeling the behaviors we want to see in others. We also need to take a hard look at the institutional structures that exacerbate and/or inhibit good self-care, and modify our policies or practices in support of health and wellness. Lastly, we need to honor what we have put in place regardless of the stressors of our daily work. There are some, but very few things that cannot wait until tomorrow-giving those who are tired and weary a chance to rest and recharge.

We must be okay with accepting the concept of self-care and balance as complimentary to the work we do in the profession of higher education and student affairs. Free from guilt, the rewards that self-care, good health and wellness, and life balance enhance our ability to be better professionals, practitioners, faculty, students, colleagues, family members, partners, lovers and friends. (Valencia, 2009, p. 44)

Reference

Valencia, I. (2009). HESA is hard shit: thank you for helping me make it through disappointment. *Comprehensive Exam*. Unpublished manuscript.