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# Energy Exchange: The Urgency to Move from Self-Care to Community-Care in Student Affairs

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Arnelle F. Sambile

*Self-care is a trending topic and buzzword in the field of student affairs, which forces professionals to be responsible for their own healing and assumes that they have the time and resources to heal. Divisions and departments encourage their employees to practice self-care with the expectation that their employees will return and continue their work. The author will explore the reasons that student affairs professionals seek care and provide a lens that can be used to transform spaces in higher education so that they become places of healing.*

Higher education exists as a microcosm of society, supporting the relationship between the rise of racially charged events and racial tension on college campuses to the increase of hate crimes across the country (Museus, Ledesma, Parker, 2015). The increase of racially-motivated crimes in the United States requires a commitment to engage with current theories and practices of care and healing, in order to help student affairs professionals and their students survive at academic institutions. Although theories and practices that focus on self-care are important and beneficial to the well-being of student affairs professionals, many do not account for power, privilege, oppression, or the needs of those with marginalized identities (Bidner, 2017). For folx from historically marginalized communities, including student affairs professionals, self-care, as it stands, does not acknowledge the time and space that is needed for self-care to take place. Racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression are pervasive in higher education and have existed in academic institutions since their conception, affecting students and student affairs professionals. The outcome is that student affairs professionals with marginalized identities are often left responsible for their own care and healing.

To support students and to sustain themselves in student affairs so that change can happen within the institution, it is imperative that student affairs professionals critique current philosophies and beliefs about self-care. By sharing my narrative,

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I hope to emphasize the importance of adapting a model of care and healing that centers in community. In this article, I will explore self-care within the context of higher education, the reasons people seek care, critiques of self-care, and ways that the field can transition to a community-care model as a means of transforming spaces in higher education.

### Theoretical Grounding

Since many student affairs professionals enter the field because of their work in higher education, their work is deeply personal. Care and support for students are at the core of student affairs work, which can make working in the profession exhausting. By providing the background and history of self-care and community-care, I will set a foundation to help explore personal narratives of care.

### Self-Care

The philosophy of self-care is central and popularized within the field of student affairs. Although an ancient theme, Moffatt, Ryan, & Barton (2016) wrote that self-care, as a philosophy, first appeared in the texts of Foucault (1986). He understood self-care to be the “art of existence,” (1986, p. 43), or the art of living and the care of self. Foucault argued that self-care is not something to be done alone, but is a social practice (p. 29). Although Foucault acknowledges self-care as a social practice, by focusing on self-care in Western Europe, scholars neglect other communities and cultures in the origin of self-care as a philosophy. More so, Moses, Bradley, and O’Callaghan (2016) examined the behaviors and wellness of 206 college students, where they characterized self-care to include “healthy eating, sleeping, exercising, and socializing behaviors” (p. 347). In student affairs, dominant narratives of self-care are focused on maintaining a work-life balance and a separation between work and wellness (Miller, 2016). These expectations of self-care fail to recognize how social identities affect the ways that people prioritize their time and how experiences at home influence the way people express themselves at work and vice versa. Exercising may not be feasible for professionals with families, and healthy eating may not be accessible for those who do not have the ingredients or the time needed to cook a healthy meal.

Personal undergraduate experiences are often the reason people enter the field of student affairs. For some, students enter the field because of their positive interactions with student affairs professionals, while others pursue a career in student affairs because of their desire to positively impact campus life due to experiences at their undergraduate institution (Hunter, 1992). Since many students come into student affairs because of their own lived-experiences, it makes the work personal. The commitment and investment to student affairs leads many professionals to experience burnout.

Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter (2001) describe burnout to be a multidimensional construct that consists of three components: exhaustion, cynicism, and

inefficacy. They contend that burnout can occur because of the conditions of the workplace, such as workload, and a lack of social support, specifically from a supervisor. For staff members with marginalized identities, it may be difficult to approach a supervisor about the amount of work they are assigned due to power dynamics and positional power. Furthermore, the field of student affairs often operates under the belief that if student affairs professionals are not doing everything, they are doing nothing (Bidner, 2017). A lack of trusting and meaningful relationships amongst employees produces mixed-messages about expectations in the workspace. Burnout prompts professionals to seek care as exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy prevent them from doing their work and supporting their students.

Although student affairs professionals do not receive any formal training or licenses in counseling, direct contact with students is central to numerous positions in the field, pushing many of them to develop helping skills (Long, 2012). The trauma that practitioners take on from their students affects their well-being and can affect how they express themselves in work and other spaces, leading them to seek care. Over recent years, there has been an increase in the demand to recruit and hire faculty and staff of color. Kayes (2006) asserts that initiatives to diversify faculty and staff that focus solely on recruitment and do not emphasize retention end up reinforcing the “revolving door” that faculty and staff of color often experience. The low retention of faculty and staff of color can be connected and attributed to racial battle fatigue. Smith, Mustaffa, Jones, Curry, and Allen (2016) use racial battle fatigue to describe the stress responses that people of color experience in reaction to harmful and persistent racialized microaggressions. Although student affairs professionals care for students, they are also wounded by systems of oppression, which can produce burnout. As noted earlier, many professional entered student affairs because of their desire to foster change in higher education, but are confronted with injustice in the ivory tower that make it challenging to work.

### **Critiques of Self-Care**

Current perceptions of self-care leave individuals in danger of being isolated in their struggle and healing (Padamsee, 2011). The responsibility to re-energize and re-fuel from workplace burnout falls on the worker, even though their work is what drains their energy. Self-care is seen as a separate supplement to the work that student affairs professionals do, since current models of self-care attribute healing to the domain of the “private sphere” (Lloro-Bidart & Semenko, 2017, p. 21). The prevailing culture of the field views healing and care as a leisure (e.g. taking a walk on the beach, watching your favorite television series), which neglects the needs of those from working-class backgrounds. This exemplifies how current views of self-care do not account for power and privilege as gender, race, and class, are all factors that contribute to the perceptions of self-care.

Professionals who lose their passion and excitement for the work are left to take care of themselves.

### Community Care

I do not believe that student affairs professionals should stop practicing self-care, but that self-care must be accompanied and complemented by community-care. Although community-care has been practiced for centuries in communities of color around the world, little scholarly research exists about community-care. One of my close friends, Teresa Reiko Perales, first introduced me to the philosophy of community-care during the fourth year of my undergraduate career. Padamsee (2011) writes about the relationship between self-care and community-care, where she argues:

Talking only about self-care when talking about [Healing Justice] is like only talking about recycling and composting when speaking on Environmental Justice. It is a necessary and important individual daily practice- but to truly seek justice for the Environment, or to truly seek healing for our communities, we need to interrupt and transform systems on a broader level.

In a society where the norm is the prioritization of the self over the collective, coming together in community is an act of resistance against dominant narratives that center individualism. The definition I propose of community-care synthesizes the work of Lincoln (2000) and Padamsee (2011), accompanied with suggestions of how we can practice community-care.

Lincoln (2000) asserts that community “is defined by mutuality and reciprocity” (p. 248). Community involves a shared-commitment between multiple individuals, where energy and effort are cyclical between the participating parties. Lincoln describes care as a “sense of community responsibility, individual need, trust, friendship, and mutual obligation” (p. 249). Community-care, at its core, is a shared responsibility to attend to the needs of the people within a group, centered in trust and reciprocity. Similar to Lincoln, Padamsee (2011) transfers the responsibility of healing from the individual to a shared commitment between communities. She states, “it is our responsibility not as individuals, but as communities to create structures in which self-care changes to community-care. In which we are cared-for and able to care for others.” She calls for the rejection of dominant ways to approach work that neglects wellness and healing. Instead, she insists on prioritizing the needs of people over the need to produce results. Well-being, healing, and other components of community-care must be integrated into the field of student affairs.

Radical listening, empathy, and vulnerability, are three ways that I learned from my peers to practice community-care. Radical is intentionally added to recognize

how identity and systems of oppression affects these practices, as stereotypes and internalized oppression can affect communication and engagement. I attribute the use of the word radical as a modifier to its definition of “an outlook that questions the legitimacy of existing systems of hierarchy as related to issues of race, gender, class, disability, sexual orientation, or other socially constructed divisions between people” (Sweet, 1998, p. 101).

Radical listening means to hear someone with the intention of acknowledging how privilege identities can affect the way people choose listen to others, not to respond, rebuttal, or speak. Individuals who uphold radical listening actively try to be present when they share space with others. When folk embrace radical empathy, they try to understand someone’s needs and circumstances, and their capacity to feel empathy for others with whom they share affinity.

To practice radical empathy, student affairs professionals can offer support and check-in with their students. To embody radical vulnerability is to be honest about one’s feelings and needs, and understand that there is a relationship between feelings, needs, and systems of oppression. It also means to be honest when one cannot offer support and to appreciate someone’s transparency about where they are. These three practices, although they may be challenging, are practical applications of community-care.

### **Energy Exchange**

The following are vignettes of two of my experiences in higher education settings, both as an undergraduate and graduate student. Care requires giving energy, and when the parties involved are clear about how much energy they need and can give, it results in a beautiful exchange. When a person feels they are giving more than others, it can be draining. I share these stories as my own form of healing and hope to reveal the urgency to shift from self-care to community-care not only to transform spaces in higher education, but also to prompt readers to reflect upon their view and approaches toward liberation.

### **Power Circuit**

At the beginning of my fourth year at San Diego State University, I decided to apply for graduate school and pursue a career in student affairs. My desire to pursue a student affairs graduate program was rooted in my lived experiences with the injustice and systemic oppression as a womxn of color at my university. When I applied to graduate school, I experienced feelings of anxiety, stress and fear. The graduate school application process felt like a daunting and impossible task since I was the first person in my family to attend a four-year university in the United States, yet alone consider pursuing a graduate degree. As a low-income, working student, I worried about how I would pay for and finance the process. When my colleagues, fellow students, and professional staff discovered

my desire to apply to graduate school, along with my multiple obligations and responsibilities, they often encouraged me: “find time for myself” and to “take time to relax,” they encouraged me to practice self-care.

Although being in class and meetings took up my energy, I was re-charged and re-energized through my job at the Center for Intercultural Relations (CIR). In the midst of my doubt and my distress, my community at the CIR saw and validated me. They saw me struggling and exhausted, rushing from class to class, meeting to meeting, and they intentionally checked-in on me. When I was too exhausted to pack lunch, I found food in the fridge accompanied with a sticky note that had my name written across the top. Members of the student staff insisted on switching shifts with me so I could sleep for an extra few hours in the morning. During my shifts, people asked me how I was doing and offered ways they could support me through the application process. Graduate students shared their stories about when they were applying to graduate school and provided me with advice. On days and weeks where I felt that I had capacity, I reciprocated the care in the ways that people felt like they needed to feel supported. A large part of why I completed the graduate school application process was because of the energy and support I received from my community at the CIR.

At the CIR, we let each other fully experience our emotions and storytelling became central to our way of healing. We shared our experiences at the university and discovered that giving space for honesty was the only way we were going to survive. There was a beautiful, fluid, exchange of energy. Our care for our community resulted in our desire to help each other when we felt we were able. We recognized the ways that power and privilege affected and shaped our friendships, and were cognizant of how we could yield our privileges to help each other.

### **Short Circuit**

Now, I am at the University of Vermont and I am almost 3,000 miles away from San Diego. I currently search for locations, people, and feelings that remind me of home. I am developing and deepening relationships with folk here, and I am finding pockets of people and places that are beginning to feel like home.

As a paraprofessional and as a student in a student affairs master’s program, I am still learning how to navigate my identities as a student and a practitioner. I frequently tell people that I am tired when asked how I am doing, and often have days where I feel drained and exhausted.

Even so, I discovered that community-care transcends location. The community I built in San Diego still re-energizes me despite the distance. Affirming text messages and kind emails from friends and family back home sustain me when I feel lost. I also developed kinship with students, colleagues, staff, and faculty in

Burlington who remind me of my “why,” who validate and challenge me when I am sitting with doubt or shame. By searching, creating, and maintaining different communities of care and support, I am able to thrive and grow.

### **Conclusion**

It is up to all student affairs professionals to decide individually, based our capacity to care and give, how much energy we invest into spaces. Building a community built on care, love, and support takes time and understanding. Offering each other grace and forgiveness are essential to community-care. My hope is that in the field of student affairs, we strive to transform our spaces to be rooted in care and healing, because “if your liberation is wrapped up with mine – for me that means that it matters how you feel and what you are feeling. Your well-being is our liberation, and I would hope that you would say the same” (Padamsee, 2011).



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