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The Transformative Power of Embracing the Whole

Dr. Brian Arao

I am grateful and deeply humbled to have been invited by this year's executive board to write the foreword for the 41st volume of *The Vermont Connection*. Given the theme of this year's volume, I cannot imagine a more timely opportunity for me to contribute again to this special journal. Sixteen years ago, I served as what is now called the Executive Editor for the 25th volume. Working alongside my peers to produce the journal was a significant part of my transformational learning experience as a student in the HESA program - a transformation which was not only intellectual and professional, but also profoundly personal. Serving on the full board and then the executive board deepened my understanding of both scholarship and professional practice in student affairs; moreover, it helped me build confidence in my capacity to lead both in and beyond the higher education setting. Being a part of *The Vermont Connection* changed me for the better as a student affairs educator, scholar, and human. As such, I am all the more pleased the theme of this year's journal calls us to reflect on the importance of "embracing the whole."

As I suspect is true for many of you, I found my way to a career in higher education in no small part because of the many ways student affairs practitioners embraced the whole of me, and helped me to embrace myself. As an undergraduate, I arrived at college as a biology major with the intention of one day becoming a physician. My parents had carefully and consistently instilled in me this vision for my life for as long as I could remember. While I had other intellectual and personal interests, I had never seriously considered any other career or major, and the idea of spending my life helping others appealed strongly to me. Although I did not find my biology, chemistry, and physics courses to be especially exciting, I was able to earn good grades. Yet as my coursework progressed, I became increasingly aware that the students who truly excelled in the sciences seemed genuinely enthusiastic about their studies, whereas for me they were only a means to an end. I began to feel more and more disconnected from my fellow biology majors; without community in my major, I became increasingly lonely and concerned I was on the wrong path.

Dr. Brian Arao (UVM HESA 2004) serves as the Associate Dean of Students and Chief of Staff at UC Santa Cruz. Brian has applied his passion for social justice work in many ways, including coauthoring a book chapter on creating "brave spaces" for social justice dialogue with another HESA alum (Arao & Clemens, 2013), facilitating training on equity and inclusion for higher education institutions and other nonprofit organizations; and serving as an intern for the Social Justice Training Institute. Brian resides in Santa Cruz with his husband and their two cats, Spike and Drusilla.

By contrast, many of the courses I took to satisfy general education requirements brought me to life, intellectually and personally. I thrived in courses on psychology, sociology, and social justice, subjects which readily engaged my curiosity and led me to questions I was innately drawn to pursue. This coursework was a labor of love rather than a chore, and my learning was thus much deeper and more satisfying. When I started to think about these differences in my academic experiences, I was confused and even fearful. What did this mean for my long-envisioned future as a physician? What if I was on the wrong path, and how could I go about finding the right one? Eventually, I worked up the courage to pose these questions aloud to the student affairs professionals in my life, such as academic advisors and those who supervised me as a resident assistant. They responded not by providing directives and advice, but rather by asking questions designed to help me construct my own meaning. In retrospect, I see clearly how they were serving as what Baxter Magolda (2001) called good companions on my journey toward finding and following my own voice.

This journey encompassed more than discovering authentic scholarly and professional interests, but also my queer identity. I started college deeply closeted, even parroting the anti-gay rhetoric in which I had been immersed for so much of my life. But it was also in college I encountered my first positive representations of queerness, both in my coursework and in the real people I encountered, my out and proud peers, faculty, and staff. I came around to a pro-queer stance by the middle of my first term, which must have seemed like an impossibly fast change to those who had known me for a long time. But in retrospect I see that the speed of the metamorphosis reflected how thirsty I had been for an alternative to the self-hating mindset so prevalent in my life before then. Even so, I struggled to apply my new queer-positive beliefs to myself because I was so fearful of losing treasured relationships with family and friends, as well as the many forms of violence - physical, emotional, and spiritual - arrayed against people who dared to live authentically and publically as queer.

Here again, student affairs practitioners walked patiently and encouragingly alongside me, helping the call of a real and honest life gradually grow stronger than my fear. With their support, I eventually found the courage to finally begin the lifelong process of coming out. While it is often challenging to live a queer life in a heteronormative world, I also experience more joy and love than I ever could have in the closet. I am thus all the more grateful for the mentors who held me as a whole person and helped me find my way to discoveries that vastly improved my life. These treasured teachers inspired me to pursue what has evolved beyond a career goal and into what I have come to think of as my calling in the world: to help others have their own powerfully transformative educational experiences.

Pursuing this calling has strengthened my core belief in social justice not simply

as a hoped-for side benefit of education but rather as an essential goal thereof. In some fields, I may not have been able to find this unity between my professional and personal values. Social justice is a political concept, and thus viewed as inappropriate in fields wherein neutrality is held as a primary value. Yet I have come to understand education as an inherently political activity (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009) which must be specifically and “fundamentally tied to a struggle for a qualitatively better life for all through the construction of a society based on nonexploitative relations and social justice” (McLaren, 1989, p. 194). Thus, I am grateful to work in a field wherein I and my colleagues are encouraged to develop and apply professional competencies in social justice and inclusion (ACPA & NASPA, 2015).

Because doing social justice work in higher education helps me connect with and live out my deeply held values, it is often a joyful and satisfying pursuit. Even so, bringing my full self to my work can also be painful. It is especially so in today’s world, which is increasingly characterized by forceful efforts in every sphere of society to resist and roll back inclusion of marginalized and minoritized communities. For marginalized and minoritized student communities, neither this kind of resistance nor the pain which accompanies it are new. As someone who holds multiple oppressed identities, I am familiar with the pain; I relate to and sometimes share it. Even so, I find our students’ pain, and thus my own, to be more intense in 2020 than at any other point in my lifetime.

Student affairs educators have a special and powerful role to play in helping their campuses address this problem. We are uniquely positioned to listen deeply to and advocate for our students. Further, we can help other campus constituencies understand students’ concerns and situate them within both an understanding of student development and the current historical and political context. I believe this mediating role is both vitally important and burdensome to sustain, because choosing to be an agent of an institution you wish to change comes with its own kind of pain, compounding the challenges already present in the work. More than once in recent years, I have been overwhelmed by the enormity of these difficulties, particularly when they activate the depression and anxiety with which I move through the world. In order to emerge from these dark moments, I have had to do something at which I do not naturally excel: follow the same advice I have given to other social justice educators by treating self-care not as a luxury but a requirement. Absent holistic health and wellbeing - encompassing physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual - it would be impossible to persist in this difficult yet worthwhile work over the long term.

Engaging with our communities - personal, professional, and of course those which span both - is one of many ways to practice self-care as a student affairs educator. I have also found such engagement to be an excellent means of discovering new

perspectives and scholarship which have helped me to learn and grow as a person. The Vermont Connection is a wonderful venue for such engagement, and this volume continues that strong tradition. I am confident I will be a different human after reading the pieces that follow - that I will be again transformed. I hope you experience your own transformation through reading, reflecting upon, and participating in dialogue with others about these works.

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