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The Difference Between Fixing, Helping, and Serving in Higher Education and Student Affairs

Bianca Natalie Ramos

Content Warning: suicidal ideation

Although student affairs professionals in this field strive towards serving students, it is common for them to fix or help students by default. In this commentary, I examine how disconnection with students can manifest in fixing and helping, while serving can embrace students' wholeness and strengthen interconnectedness. Additionally, I explore the difference between fixing, helping, and serving in higher education and student affairs through the critical lens of Rachel Naomi Remen (1999) and my lived experiences as an emerging student affairs professional. Student affairs professionals must understand the difference between fixing, helping, and serving to acknowledge how each of these three approaches are relevant to their roles. I recommend that student affairs professionals move towards serving students by taking a holistic, student-centered approach that demonstrates care and compassion for the shifting needs of students in higher education.

Keywords: wholeness, interconnectedness, serving, fixing, helping

If you ask student affairs professionals why they entered the field of higher education and student affairs, a majority of their answers will reflect a desire or passion to help college students. Recently, I enrolled in a Higher Education & Student Affairs master's program with the hope of learning how to better serve students with diverse needs, barriers, and intersecting identities. A majority of student affairs professionals in this field intend to serve students, but it is very common for them to fix or help students by default. In this commentary, I explore how disconnection with students can manifest in fixing and helping while serving can embrace students' wholeness and enhance interconnectedness. Through the critical lens of Rachel Naomi Remen (1999) and my lived experiences as an emerging student affairs professional, I explore the difference between fixing, helping, and serving in higher education and student affairs. As an emerging student affairs professional,

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I situate myself throughout this commentary by referring to myself and student affairs professionals as “we,” “us,” and “our” in hopes of reflecting and engaging in our work with students collectively.

Fixing, helping, and serving can look different in our roles as student affairs professionals. Remen (1999) describes helping as viewing others as weak or needy, creating a sense of inequality that both the helper and the person being helped feel. As helpers, we can become aware of our own strengths and expertise, and consequently, we may take away from others more than we could give them (Remen, 1999). Serving, on the other hand, is selfless and allows us to connect more deeply with others. Instead of helping with our strengths or expertise, we can serve students with ourselves, draw from our experiences, and demonstrate compassion (Remen, 1999).

When we come across students in crisis, we may be inclined to try our best to “fix” the problem at hand without regard to how we can strengthen the wholeness of the student. Unfortunately, we may subconsciously (or consciously) view a student in crisis as “broken,” “uncooperative,” or “difficult.” Student affairs professionals must understand the difference between fixing, helping, and serving and acknowledge how each of these three approaches emerge in their roles. With this in mind, student affairs professionals should shift to serving students by taking a holistic, student-centered approach to their work that demonstrates care and compassion for the shifting needs of students in higher education.

In *Residential Life*, I have seen a mix of fixing and helping, and I admit that I have found myself doing both at different times. On my first night of duty as an Assistant Residence Director, I received a phone call at 2:00 A.M. from Police Services instructing me to check in with a student experiencing suicidal thoughts. I did not realize I was still half-asleep until I heard the phrase “having thoughts of killing herself,” and I felt like my body went on high alert after hearing those words. I took down the student’s name and room number before proceeding to call the Assistant Director (AD) on duty to get advice on how to proceed. I had never responded to a student with suicidal ideation, and I wanted to be prepared and follow proper protocol. I was afraid of saying the wrong thing or failing to help the student to the best of my ability. Hearing the panic in my voice, the AD on duty encouraged me to use my helping skills. I paused and wondered, *How can I help this student? There is nothing in this duty protocol manual that tells me how to support a student through suicidal ideation.* I settled my nerves and decided to trust that I would do fine with my helping skills and active listening skills. I proceeded to check in on the student, who appeared to be upset that someone had reported her suicidal ideation to me, a complete stranger. In the back of my mind, I was hoping the student would feel better at the sight of someone checking in on her, but I had to remind myself that it was not about me; I was here to help her and

that I wanted to make sure that she was safe for the evening, I followed protocol and helped the student get in contact with the counseling center to make an appointment, and I followed up with her the next day to offer additional support, which she insisted that she did not need.

Reflecting back on that moment, I realize that I was acting from a place of fear as some of us often do when we encounter a student in crisis. I was worried about how to execute protocol instead of focusing on how I could recognize the student's journey towards wholeness and offer my support with care. When we act from a place of fear, we are holding ourselves back from the opportunity to engage in a meaningful conversation or form a genuine connection with someone. When we come across a student in crisis, we do more harm than good when we are quick to react and tell students and student affairs professionals, "Don't worry. It can be fixed." We need to shift our language and eliminate "fixing" as our approach. Instead of wondering how we can "fix" a problem, we can ask, "How can I act from a place of love and serve this student?" When we act from a place of love, we demonstrate that we genuinely care about the student's well-being. We can ask how we can support them instead of making assumptions about what they need.

Some of my colleagues in Residential Life and I have discussed how we have a tendency to operate in crisis mode whenever we are faced with a student crisis, frantically reacting instead of pausing to think about how we can serve students with their needs, interests, and identities in mind. By operating in crisis mode, we are taking on the "fixing" approach and we run the risk of becoming desensitized to crisis, which ultimately reflects distance and indifference when we interact with students in crisis. Helping can also create a distance between us and our students. Personally, I view helping as a transactional approach. For example, we can help students by providing them with a referral to the counseling center when they are feeling anxious or sad, but at the end of the day, students may continue to feel isolated, misunderstood, disconnected, and lonely. Helping can feel and appear performative; we give students the information that they need and call it a day. If we are not careful, we may fall into a routine that diminishes individualized support, and we do a disservice to our students by treating them monolithically, or like any other student we come across on campus. We need to move beyond the rehearsed "How can I help you?" and think about how we can truly serve students.

Considering that burnout is relatively common in our lives as student affairs professionals working with students in crisis or managing a large caseload, there may be times when taking on a fixing or helping approach is the most viable option. When experiencing burnout, we might revert to fixing or helping to conserve our energy and avoid using emotional labor to counsel a student through a crisis. It is critical that we recognize that we should not act as a trained counselor in our role, especially if we lack a counseling certification. However, we can take the time to

listen to students' concerns with compassion and acknowledge students' holistic self when making a referral to the counseling center. By taking the time to listen compassionately and acknowledge the student's wholeness, we are taking a step towards serving students from a place of love and care. It is crucial that we seek support from our institution to address burnout in our roles and advocate for our needs in order to be in a place to serve students.

I highly encourage student affairs professionals to reflect on moments when they have engaged in fixing and helping. Through reflecting on those moments, I hope we can determine how each approach has felt and whether fixing and helping are sustainable in our busy, dynamic roles. In my experience, I have found fixing to be draining and contributing to burnout. Helping has been something I do on auto-pilot, engaging in a transactional approach to get through the day. When I am serving students, I am reminded of the passions that fuel my purpose in this field. Not only am I fostering connections with students that make me feel whole, but I also recognize that students are more attuned to their holistic selves and feel empowered to take ownership of their learning, development, and growth. I urge student affairs professionals to gravitate towards serving students. Serving requires patience and taking the time to get to know students - their strengths, intersecting identities, goals, barriers, and needs. We have the opportunity to engage with students in meaningful ways, yet we miss those connections when we are too busy fixing and helping rather than serving. When we serve, we recognize that we are all connected and capable of vulnerability and strength. We act from a place of love and center the narratives of students that are often dismissed or silenced. Remen (1999) affirms that service can strengthen us. When we serve students, our work will renew us as we develop a sense of gratitude and remember our purpose in this field. When we serve, we know that our humanity is more powerful than our expertise, resulting in a greater awareness of our wholeness and its influence on how we serve others (Remen, 1999). We serve with the purpose of embracing wholeness and connecting with students on a deeper level in hopes that they will be seen, heard, valued, and empowered to succeed in higher education and beyond.

Reference

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