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## Toxic Rhetoric: Unpacking Discussions of Self-Care

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### Cover Page Footnote

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## Toxic Rhetoric: Unpacking Discussions of Self-Care

Dana K. Prisloe

*Self-care is a principle of the student affairs profession that has constantly been praised and espoused as necessary for effective work. Countless literature describes the benefits of self care, but little has been written about the demanding nature of student affairs that requires self-care in the first place. Rather than examining the system that overworks its professionals, scholars tend to accept this culture and tout self-care as a coping strategy to prevent burnout. However, self-care rhetoric often comes from a place of ableism and privilege and ignores marginalized identities. Additionally, using self-care as a tool to be better role models for students ignores the value and health of student affairs professionals. Using crip theory as a foundation for deconstructing dominant discourses about normality, I address how the field needs to start valuing its employees and create cultures of community care. Student affairs scholars need to critically examine the accepted norms of student affairs and advocate for their wellbeing as worthy and valued individuals.*

*keywords:* self-care, higher education, student affairs, poststructuralism, crip theory, burnout, resilience

There is an expectation in the profession of student affairs that one will always be working. Student affairs is often synonymous with terms such as burnout, exhaustion, and self-care. Burnout is defined as “the state of fatigue and frustration arising from unrealistic, excessive demands on personal resources and leading to physical and mental exhaustion” (Brewer & Clippard, 2002, p. 171). Burnout is caused by workplace conditions like excessive workloads and a lack of social support (Sambile, 2018). The 24/7 working expectation

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of the student affairs field is unrealistic and places unsustainable demands on its employees. Self-care is the act of taking care of one's mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health (Howard, 2019). Most scholars in the field discuss the inability to incorporate sustainable and successful self-care into practice, but few have addressed how the unhealthy nature of this work is demanding the need for self-care. As a result, self-care rhetoric is often used as a coping mechanism to deal with the demands of the profession. This rhetoric ignores marginalized identities, such as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color and working parents, and places responsibility for care on individuals rather than examining the structural norms that perpetuate unhealthy work environments. Additionally, self-care is also used as an argument for becoming positive role models for students, rather than addressing the needs of professionals and recognizing their value and worth. This paper seeks to uncover why professionals are so overworked, how self-care rhetoric is toxic, and to encourage scholars to critically examine the norms of student affairs rather than just accept them. Implications for practice are discussed, including developing structures of community care.

### **Poststructuralism and Crip Theory**

Poststructuralists reveal how the discourse of social institutions construct and maintain power (Abes, 2019). The purpose of poststructuralist theories is to deconstruct normalcy by questioning accepted discourse and recognizing how that discourse is shaped in ways we as practitioners may not know how to describe. There are systems of oppression within our society that are shaping reality, and a poststructuralist's goal is to tear down those systems, though not specifically to rebuild. The core of crip theory, and this paper, is to deconstruct these dominant discourses and expose and critique how they structure reality.

Crip theorists challenge dominant discourses of who and what are normal, as well as recognize the fluid and contested nature of identity (Abes, 2019). Ableism upholds compulsory able-bodiedness (McRuer, 2006) and able-mindedness (Kafer, 2013), which pushes people toward a normalcy that only few can achieve. This ableism also determines who is disabled, and therefore who is less worthy. Crip theory embodies poststructuralism by critiquing the discourses of compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness and the "resulting disabled–non-disabled binary" that labels disability as "abnormal" (Abes, 2019, p. 66). To "crip" is to expose these discourses in contexts where

disability is purposefully explored as well as in contexts not explicitly focused on disability (McRuer, 2006). Crippling “spins mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions and exclusionary effects” (Sandahl, 2003, p. 37). In this case, the mainstream representations or practices are the culture of student affairs work and the unrealistic discussions of self-care. I attempt to crip the culture of student affairs to highlight the harmful practices within the field and showcase how inaccessible real self-care is.

### **Cripistemology**

Crip theory also offers perspectives on the nature of knowledge production and validity. Cripistemology is the critical, social, and personal knowledge production from the perspectives of disabled people (Abes, 2019). It requires “thinking the unthinkable” by embracing “knowledge of bodies” and “bodies of knowledge” previously deemed unknowable by ableist norms (Evelles, 2013, p. 37). Cripistemology also embraces the multiple ways that minds make sense of and produce knowledge (Johnson & McRuer, 2014). Crip failure is a concept within cripistemology, which highlights the productive potential in rejecting ableist norms and educational practices. Crip failure transforms failure from an ableist viewpoint into meaningful, non-normative ways of knowledge production (Abes, 2019). Cripistemology also embraces crip time, which challenges the normalized, disabling pace of life. Instead of just being an extension to allow disabled people more time, crip time is “a challenge to normative and normalizing expectations of pace and scheduling. Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds” (Kafer, 2013, p. 27). Crip time rejects ableist norms of what efficiency looks like and challenges neoliberal understandings of productivity (McRuer, 2006). Emphasizing this year’s journal theme, I choose to embrace opposition and resistance by utilizing crip failure and crip time as tools to deconstruct harmful norms in the field of student affairs.

### **Positionality**

I am undertaking this examination of self-care to challenge my own personal assumptions of productivity and to challenge the dominant ideologies I hold. Cisgender, white, temporarily able-bodied and able-minded practitioners need to understand and acknowledge the privilege they hold from being part of the majority and dominant group. I have been ingrained by my own

experience and knowledge that a “good” worker is one who works 40+ hours a week, does not question the system, and engages in self-care to be resilient. My beliefs come to me based on expectations my peers, faculty, and supervisors pushed on me during my working career and as a graduate student. As someone who lives with mental illness, I have always been told that I need to “get better” so that I can be productive within higher education. I was told to use self-care as a tool to cope with the “normal” stressors of life and to fill any deficits I may have from my mental illnesses. This mindset of “powering through” has not worked for me in the past, and even resulted in my need to take an extended leave of absence from school.

With the help of concepts like *crip failure* and *crip time*, I am actively trying to unpack these strict notions of productivity as I am realizing they are not universally accepted or applicable. Though I do live with mental illness, it is my responsibility as a cisgender, white, temporarily able-bodied practitioner to push back on “accepted” best practices and to not assume that what is used is what is “best.” Self-care is so ingrained in higher education that we do not even blink when someone says they are burnt out. I am using this opportunity to reflect on my various identities and the biases I hold, and to challenge what I previously considered productive and healthy. I need to acknowledge the role my identities hold and the power structures in play while working with BIPOC, trans, and disabled students, faculty, and staff. I want to enter the field of higher education prepared to support students and peers, but I am ineffective and harmful as a practitioner when I do not take care of my own wellbeing, too. I urge other practitioners to reflect on their various identities and whether or not they are challenging the toxic rhetoric of self-care in higher education.

### **Overworking is Normal**

The dominant discourse in student affairs is that the field requires overworking and near devotion from its employees. Plenty of literature (Burke et al., 2017; Howard, 2019; Sallee, 2019) from student affairs professionals cites the 24/7 nature of the work, where the requirement of constant engagement goes beyond a typical 9-5 job. In a study of male student affairs professionals balancing fatherhood and work, Sallee (2019) quoted many participants who name the fact that the ideal worker is always working and after hours work is expected. One participant noted, “If you’re going to do student affairs right, in my opinion, it is not a 9 to 5 job” (p. 1242). Another explained, “I feel it just

being part of the field that, you know there's this pressure to always be doing more. And always be doing" (p. 1243). This belief of total devotion is widely accepted in the field as it is considered just part of the job. Institutions of higher education are "greedy" and demand "total loyalty" from employees, and there is an expectation of prioritizing work above all else (p. 1235). Student affairs prioritizes busyness and overachievers, as Bidner (2017) noted that professionals compete for the title of "most-overworked" and "if we are not doing everything, we are doing nothing" (p. 37). Additionally, the reward for overworking is often the expectation that professionals will continue to dedicate extra time to their work (Anthony, 2016). Balance is elusive from the beginning of a student affairs career, and if someone is waiting for work to be done to take a break, they will always be waiting.

This norm of overworking is so common that some professionals have left the field because they could not adapt to it. Anthony (2016) noted that they resigned from student affairs because balancing work and life was not simultaneously sustainable. Like the concept of *crip time*, we would hope our employment would adjust to our lives and needs, but with student affairs it has to be the other way around: our lives need to adjust to work. Most student affairs professionals know someone who has left the field because they could not balance their work with their personal commitments (Beeny et al., 2005). The nature of the work does not focus on retention or sustainability of professionals, reinforcing the "revolving door" (Sambile, 2018, p. 34) and high attrition rates (Anthony, 2016). Scholars wonder if the unpredictable work leaves any time for personal responsibilities and desires, and whether student affairs work is better left for people without families or other outside demands (Anthony, 2016). This demanding approach to working in student affairs is especially dangerous due to the emotional attachments and investments professionals make.

### **Emotional Nature**

It is important to discuss how the draining culture of student affairs is intrinsically linked to the emotional nature of the work. Student affairs employees are professional caregivers, where supporting students is at the core of the work (Anthony, 2016; Sambile, 2018). Putting the needs of students above our own is expected and celebrated (Gladieux & Boettcher, 2019). Many people come to the field of student affairs because of their own experiences, which makes the work extremely personal (Sambile, 2018). Because of this,

professionals are personally invested in their work and can form emotional attachments to their students and institutions. Professionals can also take on their students' trauma, experience compassion fatigue, and feel exhausted due to the heavy personal investments (Burke et al., 2017; Sambile, 2018). Self-care is promoted as a way to cope with the effects of this personal work, and professionals are expected to take time off and come back fully recharged for work (Vereen, 2020). However, due to the emotional nature of the work, it can be difficult to step away without feeling like you are letting someone down or disappointing them (Miller, 2016). This guilt can further prevent professionals from taking time off or engaging in self-care, and it reinforces the dominant discourse that student affairs work should be a 24/7 investment.

### Self-Care Rhetoric

Student affairs work requires long hours, leaving professionals physically and emotionally exhausted by the end of the semester or academic year (Burke et al., 2017). It is impossible to not be affected by the emotional work, risking burnout and compassion fatigue. Self-care can help with these symptoms and is a component of student affairs work that is widely accepted and discussed. Self-care for student affairs professionals is viewed as necessary for longevity in the profession, where employees are expected to fully give themselves to students (Burke et al., 2017; Howard, 2019; Miller, 2016). Scholars have been discussing self-care for years (Anthony, 2016) and complain that professionals do not utilize it enough (Miller, 2016), yet very little is being done to actually prioritize self-care. Limited budgets, professional expectations, and the 24/7 nature of the work do not allow for realistic and sustainable self-care (Anthony, 2016; Burke et al., 2017). Current discussions and rhetoric of self-care do not acknowledge the time and space needed for quality care to actually take place (Sambile, 2018). Beeny et al. (2005) noted that finding balance is "more of a goal than an achievement" (p. 137). While the field espouses theoretical support for self-care and wellbeing, no concrete steps have been taken to actually incorporate self-care sustainably into the lives of employees.

Additionally, very little literature is discussing the underlying problem: the need for self-care in the first place. Scholars have discussed the inability to incorporate sustainable and successful self-care into practice, but few, if any, have addressed how the unhealthy nature of the work is demanding this need for wellness. The rhetoric around self-care in student affairs is that

professionals should use self-care to cope with the work. Instead, shouldn't we be asking why we are allowing for unhealthy work environments in the first place? This view of self-care as necessary for work is toxic and does very little to actually address the systemic and structural issues of student affairs. Building from the poststructuralist nature of crip theory to dismantle dominant discourse about what is "normal", I argue that the over-demanding, total devotion nature of the work should be seen as the problem, not the inability to squeeze self-care into our routines.

### **Ableist & Privileged Point of View**

Aside from ignoring the systemic issues in the field of student affairs, self-care rhetoric also tends to come from an ableist and privileged point of view. Bidner (2017) explained that self-care is often romanticized in literature, when in reality it is not always positive or fulfilling. The dominant narrative that we have control over when and how we engage in self-care is not attainable for everyone (Anthony, 2016; Burke et al., 2017), overlooks people with marginalized identities (Sambile, 2018), and assumes able-bodiedness and able-mindedness. For example, Howard (2019) suggested that professionals take a week off of work to rest and recharge, rather than powering through their work. However, this ableist approach rejects crip time and assumes someone has control over their mind and body and will be ready to go back after a week off. McMurtrie (2013) also noted, "For people to be resilient, they must believe they have the power to control their lives" (para. 31). The belief that someone has control over their life is not that simple. Bidner (2017) explained that self-care espouses the idea that we can manage our bodies and minds, and rest will always help us bounce back fully. This ableist viewpoint does not account for people with physical and mental disabilities, such as chronic or mental illnesses. Factors outside of one's control do not care about plans or preparation (Gladieux & Boettcher, 2019). Bidner (2017) encouraged us to resist the idea that self-care can create a healthy and whole person. The idea of work life balance, supported with self-care, comes from a position of privilege in which one has control over their health. Similarly, the idea that one can supplement the overworking nature of student affairs with self-care does not consider those with marginalized identities, such as BIPOC folx and working parents. Ballysingh (2019) explained that the field does not support sustainability for BIPOC folx and mothers. She described, "Higher education claims to support women, parents, and families,

but often falls short of mission enactment” (para. 9). This is especially true when it comes to self-care rhetoric, which assumes control of time and circumstance. Parents do not always have this luxury. The ideal worker in student affairs has no childcare responsibilities and is expected to work all the time (Sallee, 2019). Hegemonic masculinity also requires that working fathers justify their time off, and are therefore less likely to ask for a leave of absence. The dominant narrative of overworking in student affairs and having control of one’s self-care comes from a privileged and ableist point of view that does not account for people with marginalized identities.

### **Individual Responsibility vs Structural Issues**

Plenty of scholars have discussed self-care and presented it as an individual responsibility necessary to continue working efficiently in the field (Burke et al., 2017; Howard, 2019; Sallee, 2019; Sambile, 2018). Self-care is presented as a resiliency tool to be used so we can be aware of ourselves and better prepared to take care of our problems (Burke et al., 2017). Additionally, Sallee (2019) encouraged professionals to develop healthy lives outside of the office. Howard (2019) noted that taking control of self-care is no one’s responsibility but the individual’s. A professional’s job is to know themselves and engage in self-care, and they cannot rely on others to look out for them. Self-care is seen as a supplement to work and the opportunity to re-fuel (Sambile, 2018). However, these attitudes do not address the way our systems are built, and the view of self-care as an individual responsibility ignores systemically unhealthy work environments. It embraces the same harmful rhetoric as resiliency, where you either do self-care successfully, or you fail and you are the one to blame. These approaches to self-care view burnout, compassion fatigue, and exhaustion as individual problems and do not address the structures in place that prevent professionals from prioritizing their health.

The individual responsibility of being resilient and fully-charged emotionally is unrealistic and unsustainable (Vereen, 2020). The demands of student affairs work leave no room for “emotional nourishment” unless changes in the system also occur (Anthony, 2016, p. 10). Self-care is not solely an individual’s responsibility or problem. The American view of resilience is based so much on the individual and not the community (McMurtrie, 2013). People need larger supportive environments to cope, and strong groups provide collective efficacy. We need to examine our structures and expectations in students affairs and understand how they exacerbate or inhibit healthy work practices (Miller, 2016). Padasme

(2011) explained, “[Self-care] 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” (para. 4). Viewing self-care as an individual’s responsibility removes the possibility of modifying policies and practices. Changing the over-demanding culture of student affairs goes beyond individual self-care: it requires examining the structural beliefs and systems in place that promote overworking.

## **Role Models**

Student affairs professionals are viewed as role models for the students they support and work with. Literature in the field discussing self-care highlights that it is not only good for the professional, but also a good example to set for students (Anthony, 2016; Bidner, 2017; Howard, 2019). The opportunity for students to learn from unhealthy practices of self-care is present when professionals are not able to role model work-life balance (Howard, 2019). What message is sent to students when professionals are burnt out and exhausted? Anthony (2016) explained that the message of overworking with no self-care tells students that they should devote half their time and energy to work and they should depend only on themselves and not a community. The student affairs field is eager to help students rebound and overcome obstacles, and this example is set through healthy employees that demonstrate work does not make a life whole (Anthony, 2016; Brown & Kafka, 2020; Ramdath, 2019).

However, this rhetoric that student affairs professionals should engage in self-care to role model good examples for students completely ignores the self-worth, health, and wellbeing of the employee. Burke et al. (2017) argued that if professionals engage in self-care, they will be better workers to the institution and to students. Gladieux and Boettcher (2019) noted that by suppressing feelings, professionals can become emotionally hazardous to their work and students. But what about the wellbeing of the professional? The rhetoric used in these articles about role modeling prioritizes the institution and the students over the professional. These discussions of self-care highlight that work and role modeling for students should be the goal of self-care rather than the health of the individual. This is an unhealthy message that does not recognize the value and wellbeing of employees who work in the field, but rather focuses again on prioritizing work and students over self.

## Implications for Practice

With all this in mind, it is imperative to shift the dialogue and expectations of student affairs culture from one that is over-demanding to one that values and prioritizes its employees. While a poststructuralist's goal is to tear down those systems and not specifically to rebuild them, I do want to provide some implications and recommendations for student affairs practice. The field needs to recognize and normalize professionals not offering to do tasks they do not have the capacity for (Gladieux & Boettcher, 2019). Leaders in the field need to support employees and recognize their demands and expectations of work beyond the typical 9-5. Support structures need to be in place that remove cultures of overwork and respect employees' decisions to take time off and stop working when they leave the office (Miller, 2016). The field needs to recognize that working all the time does not make better employees because it can lead to burnout. Compensation packages and benefit plans need to include enough financial support and opportunities to seek resources that practitioners can use to support their health and wellbeing. Self-care should still be encouraged, guilt-free, but it should not be seen as a supplement to the demanding nature of the work. Self-care should embrace *crip time* and *crip failure*; it should not have a time limit or come with the expectation that employees will return fully recharged to work. It should also recognize the limitations that marginalized identities have in engaging in self-care, and incorporated wellness should be accessible across identities (Anthony, 2016). It is also imperative to emphasize the importance of self-care for the professional, and not just as an opportunity to be a role model for students.

Additionally, supportive cultures of community care need to develop in the field. Conversations of mental health need to be normalized, and showing up means vocalizing vulnerability and authenticity in the workplace (Vereen, 2020). Community care is a shared responsibility to attend to the needs of people in a group, grounded in trust and belief of reciprocity (Padasmee, 2011; Sambile, 2018). Coming together as a community of student affairs is an act of resistance against the dominant individualistic narrative. A network of community care also prioritizes the wellbeing of its individuals and recognizes their value, rather than just using employees as role models for students. failure; it should not have a time limit or come with the expectation that employees will return fully recharged to work. It should also recognize the limitations that marginalized identities have in engaging in self-care, and incorporated wellness should be accessible across identities (Anthony, 2016). It is also imperative to emphasize

the importance of self-care for the professional, and not just as an opportunity to be a role model for students. Additionally, supportive cultures of community care need to develop in the field. Conversations of mental health need to be normalized, and showing up means vocalizing vulnerability and authenticity in the workplace (Vereen, 2020). Community care is a shared responsibility to attend to the needs of people in a group, grounded in trust and belief of reciprocity (Padasmee, 2011; Sambile, 2018). Coming together as a community of student affairs is an act of resistance against the dominant individualistic narrative. A network of community care also prioritizes the wellbeing of its individuals and recognizes their value, rather than just using employees as role models for students.

### **Conclusion**

Emphasizing the theme of this year's TVC 43 journal, embracing opposition and resistance means disrupting these toxic discourses of self-care, as they place blame on individuals instead of systems. The culture of work needs to change, and self-care should be seen as encouraging wellness and wellbeing, not as a coping mechanism to deal with the burdens of work. Literature and reflection needs to move away from describing the benefits of self care, but rather focus and critique the over-demanding nature of the student affairs profession. Any discussions of self-care need to recognize the influence of identity, especially those with marginalized identities, and avoid coming from a place of ableism and privilege. Additionally, using self-care as a tool to be better role models for students ignores the value and health of student affairs professionals. Liberation within higher education includes dismantling dominant harmful discourse and instead valuing employees and creating cultures of community care. Student affairs scholars need to continue to use crip theory to critically examine the accepted norms of student affairs and advocate for their wellbeing as worthy and valued individuals.

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