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Liberation in Authenticity: The Relational Beauty of Post-Pandemic Higher Education

Annamaria Cavaleri

The COVID-19 pandemic permanently altered the field of higher education and created a broad culture shift in labor across the country. In this commentary, I explore the idea that the demands of student affairs practitioners are intensifying as students crave connection to others, yet student affairs professionals may be seeking to build an identity outside of work. I offer the perspective that as higher education becomes more relational, it creates room for the exploration of personhood, humanity, and the liberation of authenticity.

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It is often that discourse around higher education and student affairs centers the negative parts of the field and the need for change. While this criticality is vital to our roles as student affairs practitioners, there is great beauty and importance that can be found in uplifting glimmers of hope in the field. While the COVID-19 pandemic took a massive irreversible toll on higher education, it may have created an invitation for liberation. As students crave connection, the roles of student affairs administrators are growing far more relational, and the pandemic exposed the burning need for an identity and a lifestyle beyond work. At this intersection, there is hope in the potential for student affairs practitioners to bring authenticity into post-pandemic higher education.

I am currently a second-year student enrolled in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) program at the University of Vermont, and I work as a Residence Director in Residential Life. I take classes where I learn how important college is for student growth and development, and I help support students living in the halls. When I first began my role, I faced imposter syndrome as I navigated my ability to support students given the pandemic's impact on my own college experience. Despite these insecurities, I found that my experience attending college through the COVID-19 pandemic has leveraged my ability to personally relate to students. When my students returned to campus in the Fall of 2021, many were holding fear around what this year would look like compared to last, as they had not yet experienced a fully in-person year in college. I was able to closely understand their experiences, which allowed me to form trusting relationships with my Resident Advisors and the residents in my community. This strong desire to relate through shared tumultuous experiences made my work in my first year in Residential Life far more relational than I had ever known it would be. Throughout my weeks on call, I responded to many students of concern situations, some of which yielded heartfelt conversations where I helped students to realize that they were not alone. I never thought of myself as a relationship-oriented practitioner, but the way I have operated in my role throughout these past two years has been by supporting students through centering our relationship and their personhood.

The intensifying demands of student affairs practitioners and the broad culture shift of labor in a post-pandemic United States creates a paradox. As work and education shifted to being remote, many employees spent months in quarantine, working from home. Time seemingly slowed down as home and work became one, and a certain beauty emerged as some rediscovered their humanity outside of the demands of labor. The field of higher education is one microcosm of a much larger culture shift – people are craving a lifestyle that is not dominated by their job or production value (Liu, 2022). What has in turn followed suit is what is known as the great resignation in higher education. As the demands of student affairs professionals increase, it is growing harder to create boundaries around work and personal life. At the same time, some student affairs professionals are realizing their value beyond their job. I was previously a person who found my motivation through working toward my

next professional experience or academic accolade. I would dream of a future centered on my career and define my success by climbing to the top of my field and making a salary. Although it at first felt shameful to admit, I am starting to instead dream of a future where my job is not all-consuming, my salary is not a prime focus, and I am instead able to center developing my personhood inside and outside of work. I am craving the time to do things that make me happy and create an identity for myself – reading, petting my cat, painting, or sitting on my living room floor doing puzzles.

The paradoxical relationship between the relational demands of student affairs work and the great resignation due to burnout makes it difficult to not perceive the field of higher education as headed for doom. So how do we as practitioners sustain ourselves in a field that is constantly changing in this way? I cannot help but wonder if there is hope in this culture shift. Students are craving connection. The work of student affairs practitioners is becoming relational. Student affairs practitioners are craving time to be their authentic selves and the pandemic showed them the value in doing what they love outside of their jobs. We can learn something from the time we spent in isolation. I spent months meeting my coworker's pets through Zoom screens, sharing hobbies and recipes, and becoming familiar with their home lives for better or for worse. I was forced into a certain collective vulnerability. Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) suggests that strong relationships are not built without vulnerability and authenticity (Schwartz, 2017), implicating that authenticity leads to growth-in-relation and thus is a central piece of relationship building. As student needs are becoming more relational, we as student affairs professionals can strengthen those relationships through appropriately revealing our humanity.

This is not to say that there should not be a separation between work and personal life, as part of authenticity is boundary setting. This is also not to say that bringing authenticity into work is easy or expected. There are barriers and challenges to being vulnerable that are real and valid, put in place by systems that have been designed to feed into a capitalistic culture centered on philosophies of professionalism that ought to be deconstructed. Authenticity is also not always safe. However, this culture shift could be viewed as an invitation for student affairs practitioners to reflect on what leaning into authenticity means for them, and what it could mean to bring our humanity into our jobs. Depending on comfort level, in practice this could look like sharing pieces of who we are with students outside of work, such as using our hobbies and interests. It could also look like admitting to our students when we are struggling or when we are not okay, modeling the same vulnerability that we might ask of them. It may look like demonstrating self-care to our students by practicing it ourselves.

So where do we go from here? Of course, these strategies are not as easily practiced as they are written, but we as practitioners in this field need to start reflecting upon what it means to us to dismantle the notion of separating our authentic selves from our work environment. Residential Life is demanding, and it pushes the boundaries of a work-life balance. But discovering where I fall within those boundaries and being able to reveal my humanity in a relational way with my students has taught

me a great deal. It has made me a better practitioner and a happier human. We should reflect on our boundaries around communication, ways we can better assert our needs, and being as kind to ourselves as we are to our students. There is hope in the relational beauty of post-pandemic higher education being the liberation of authenticity.

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