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Z'uko [Z]

The University of Vermont

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Higher Ed Killjoys: Trauma/Drama – Doing the Most and Being “a lot”
Z’uko

Centering
If you started reading this expecting a scholarly review of higher education literature complete with a pristine APA-approved list of citations, you’ve come to the wrong place. What I can promise you, however, is a thoughtful and intentional reflection on student affairs work centered in identity, storytelling, and inclusion – which will always give credit to scholars and creators, whom you can research in your own time. I will especially center authors and intellectuals who hold intersecting marginalized identities, including Kimberlé Crenshaw and Sara Ahmed. The purpose of this article is to challenge Western norms around scholarship and dismantle systems of white supremacy including perfectionism, prestige, power, and privilege. If your first thought is to critique the formatting, grammar, or academic nature of this piece, you are exactly the intended audience. For everyone else, I welcome you into this space and hope you can find parts of your incredible and valid journeys reflected in my own. Lastly, I am writing this article on stolen land, and while I cannot fix the issues of colonialism or oppression of indigeneity, the small piece of “revolution” I can offer the world now is this piece of work.

Context
I’ll admit – when I initially started writing this, it was for selfish reasons. I thought it would be a healing experience, and a lot of my previous attempts at getting published were shut down because of my candor. However, throughout the process of refining this piece and reflecting on my journey, I have brought to life what I hope is an article that inspires student affairs professionals and also uplifts the voices or marginalized people who read this. My goal here is for anyone who is currently starting a student-focused career who feels alone to know that there are others who have gone through what they are experiencing. I want newer professionals to see a future in which they can balance their work and personal lives, and I also wish for more “seasoned” professionals (supervisors and managers, for example) to see in this piece ways they can use their positional power to create a culture of positive change and inclusion in their workspaces – especially if they are in a place where they are recruiting, interviewing, hiring, and training new employees.

At the time of writing this, I am 28 years old and making $36,000 a year (with six years of post-undergrad experience) while working on a master’s that I started in the fall semester of 2017. This context is important because it seeks to explain two drastically different paradigms of the same issue – success. On the one hand, I had been told throughout my undergraduate career that I could finish an M.Ed. in two years, get an entry-level job by 24 and work my way up through the

Z’uko (she/they/be/any pronouns) is a higher education anthropologist who studies student engagement, belonging, retention, and inclusion. They currently do research that surrounds two different, but intrinsically related, issues: retention of faculty and staff of color and the experiences of marginalized undergraduate students. When Z is on campus, you can generally find her teaching undergraduate anthropology students or meeting with students and faculty to assess curriculum and inclusive practices.
ranks and be a Director by 30 if I did everything right. What they failed to mention though, is that that trajectory was only available to cisgender white men in higher education, and that for me, doing everything right would still never be enough. One of the reasons we see faculty and student affairs professionals of color leave higher education within the first two years is because it is unsustainable to have to split your focus between supporting students, doing your “duties as assigned” and attending university functions, combating discrimination at work, and in extreme cases, having to sacrifice mental and physical health for your livelihood.

The reflections and recommendations in this piece will focus both on individual players and the systems in which we work, operate, live, and attempt to survive. Power and privilege do not exist in a vacuum—we know that generally, even the most racist or ignorant people didn’t explicitly plan to be that way. They were raised in environments that taught them those worldviews, and we all live in a society that holds certain things to be true, and does little to change them: the gender pay gap, over policing of people of color, reproductive rights, etc. Because human beings are social animals, and we have a biological need to connect and to be liked, systems of oppression are engrained into culture over hundreds of years until they become part of the collective consciousness. This is the crux of why DEI work is so difficult: we have to balance the responsibility to do better and be more inclusive with the knowledge that those who benefit from racism, sexism, etc. rarely asked to do so. How do we hold these multiple, conflicting truths at once? I hope to be that guide, both for you reading this and for all of my students.

There was no mentor there to tell me that I would be fired from half a dozen jobs for being trans, or that my apartment would burn down, causing me to live out of my car for a while and therefore be unable to adequately support my students—resulting in a hiatus from higher education which coincidentally lined up with the pandemic. On the other hand, however, these traumatic experiences have allowed me to reflect deeply on society’s definition of “success” and come to terms with where I am now, despite how much failure has defined my life over the last decade. This, in turn, allows me to better support my students, and the cycle of resilience continues for another generation. That is why I stay, despite the borderline illegal terminations, the weeks with little food or drink, and the general marathon that is advocating for my identities. I stay despite 80% of my time being devoted to defending myself at work, which only leaves one fifth of my energy left to supporting my students and staying alive.

**Killjoy**

In The Feminist Killjoy Handbook: The Radical Potential of Getting in the Way (2023), Sara Ahmed writes, “You become a feminist killjoy when you get in the way of the happiness of others, or when you just get in the way...” My entire career in higher education and student affairs has been a commentary on being in the way, sometimes even by just existing. I have been investigated and fired for calling out racism and transphobia, had colleagues turn their backs on me while I tried to advocate for marginalized students, and been left without a home or food to eat due to the cold indifference of managers and administrators. As Ahmed describes in much of her literature, when we [killjoys] point out an issue, we become the issue. The correlation between who I am (trans, brown, disabled, etc.) and what I do (stick up for students of color, call out departmental and institutional harm, etc.) is directly
responsible for others viewing me as a killjoy. In advocating for a student who was sexually assaulted or who has faced another wrong at the hands of the university, we become the focus of the investigation because our killjoy reputation is in direct dissonance with the way the institution sees itself. The image leaders have in their heads about who they are and what environment they’ve curated is so strikingly at odds with what we have shared, that it is more natural in their minds to condemn us and our thinking than seek to improve the systems that have failed that student.

I would argue that anyone who holds a marginalized identity in student affairs is a higher education killjoy. The more subordinated groups you belong to, the “bigger” your killjoy status. We have all seen the white men in a meeting roll their eyes when the black woman opens her mouth to speak; lest she dare to disagree with anything their toxic masculinity has already espoused to the group. As a short, adopted, poor, brown, disabled, queer, trans educator, I am the Pegasus of pegasi – the quintessential killjoy target. We know from Greek myth that there are a group of winged horses that are magical, special, beautiful; but at times misunderstood. Among these is a specific son of Poseidon, Pegasus, who is born from the cruel and bloody severing of Medusa’s head by Perseus. From a dark and cursed background springs forth an icon who goes on to become a hero and a symbol known around the world even in modern times. This is how I see my killjoy status. Let me clarify that I don’t see myself as special or as a hero of any sort; what I meant to say was that from trauma and being on the brink of death, I have become a higher education killjoy who sticks out even among the outspoken staff and faculty members on campus. For better or worse, students, staff, faculty, and administrators know that I will say what is right, and not what is easy. For students in particular, this allows me to build trust with them because they know that I will always put them first, even at risk of my career trajectory.

I am a microcosm of society – dark and light, the monotone 9-5 and the rainbow spectrum of joy, identity, and humanity. However, for every rainbow there is a lightning storm, and while I celebrate my killjoy identity more and more as I get older, there are obviously many major downsides to being branded as one. As S. Tay Glover states in “Black Lesbians – Who Will Fight for Our Lives but Us?: Navigating Power, Belonging, Labor, Resistance, and Graduate Student Survival in the Ivory Tower, “I identified all too well with Ahmed’s poetic overview of the violence and bureaucracy that Black people, queers of color, and women are set up to experience… I was in the midst of intense departmental drama where I was positioned as the problem for ‘talking back’… and/or choosing silence in an attempt to avoid conflict and backlash (hooks).” Even as I write this, I am being investigated for outspokenness at the university. I am acutely aware that this article could get me in trouble – because we know that the First Amendment has historically conflicted with Institutional Academic Freedom, especially for marginalized higher ed professionals. So why write it? I’ll leave you to reflect on that yourselves.

The question becomes: How does one sustain a career in student affairs? There are two main lessons I have learned. The first is that marginalized student affairs professionals need to choose their battles, not in any effort to sacrifice their personal ethics or beliefs, but to preserve a modicum of peace and self-respect in environments not built for them. The second is that our colleagues with privileged identities and experiences need to do more. We are taught self-care on dangerous extremes: either we don’t practice it at all, or we lean into it so much that the struggles of others become so small in our peripheral vision so as to cease existing. For example, one might practice “self-care” by refusing to read
or watch the news. In small doses this is most likely a positive choice, given how much death, war, disease, and inequity there exists in the world. However, one could take that to an extreme and say “I am never going to watch the news or get involved in politics” which is dangerous because it allows them to justify ignoring the plight of the disenfranchised everywhere in the world. Take what’s currently happening all over the world, both in places that are in the media constantly and places that nobody is really taking about in the mainstream. I have to be the first to admit that I do not know every intricacy of the Gaza crisis, but that does not then give me the right to “unplug” from it. In this same vein, higher education professionals who enjoy higher levels of privilege must not turn their backs on us.

The direction and recommendations in this article are for student affairs practitioners who hold dominant identities. Because they are not the ones being reported, harassed, or terminated, they can often forget that the very people they sit next to in class or across from in team meetings are going through these things. In creating cohorts of engaged and inclusive student affairs practitioners, this article will seek to provide some tangible ways that folx with privileged experiences can support those of us who have been systemically disenfranchised both in higher education and in the broader society. These will range from low-effort and low-risk actions to more involved advocacy and activism, with the knowledge that different people have the physical and emotional capacity to be change agents in different ways. I also need to state explicitly that we all navigate both privilege and marginalization. The point of Crenshaw’s work with black women in the legal system was to explain how multiple identities add layers of complexity to our experiences, which led to her coining the term “intersectionality” in 1989. This concept can be used to explore how multiple identities can layer on, even through privilege and subordination, even though her original work discussed two marginalized groups.

**Recommendations**

Here’s a low-stakes challenge for my more privileged colleagues: the next time you’re in a meeting, take stock of who in the room is speaking the most. Is the woman of color on your team getting spoken over, or outright ignored? Say something and uplift her voice. If she’s interrupted or something she’s said has been co-opted or reframed, a simple “I don’t think she was done talking” or “, can you clarify what you meant? I’m not sure it was properly heard or understood.” can go a long way. This is extremely low risk in the majority of situations, and if you’re a white man, for example, the chances of you being reprimanded or fired for speaking up are relatively low. However, for the black woman on your staff, having her voice uplifted can be the difference between feeling welcome on your team and feeling edged out. Likewise, look inward as well. You don’t need to be picketing or going on hunger strike to help your coworkers in higher education. If you are feeling a sense of discomfort (maybe you’re the one who subconsciously interrupts your coworkers of color) start with these small and tangible goals.

Moving up a step, one way you can take the burden off of your marginalized teammates is to offer to bring their concerns up to a manager or supervisor on their behalf. If you notice your trans colleague is being deadnamed and/or misgendered in meetings, email communications, Teams chats, etc., reach out to your team’s supervisor and say something. Chances are, again, that saying something
to your supervisor as a cisgender person isn’t going to have negative ramifications in most cases. The positive impact you can have though – that’s huge. When your trans or queer colleague is labeled as “a lot” or “too much” on a regular basis, offering to take some of that burden for them can make a huge difference. Remember that instead of speaking for them, you’re uplifting their voice and taking some of the work to balance the scales. Keep in mind that every time your trans colleague has to raise issues of getting misgendered and deadnamed, they have to retraumatize themselves – and this is in addition to this happening every time they get official communications and legal paperwork from the university, notifications to approve or log time online, or have to file their taxes.

Adding another layer on in terms of intention and labor, something you can do as someone with positional power or privileged identities is compensate marginalized people for their voices and time. Even if this doesn’t mean actual money in their pockets (because that’s not always possible, especially in strict higher education policy environments) there are ways you can improve sense of belonging and quality of life for the coworkers on your team who are doing the most emotional labor. When departmental money or resources are being used, center marginalized colleagues in that effort, whether it’s providing extra food for an event or paying for professional development opportunities that they would never have access to otherwise. If you’re a man who is making more than your woman-identified colleagues for doing the same job, even the playing field by either helping them advocate for higher pay or offering to be the one who buys lunch that day.

Finally, let’s talk about positional power and creating sustainable change. For example, if you’re a hiring manager or you sit on a search committee for a new faculty member or a coordinator for student engagement, you have palpable and tangible impact with your words and your recommendations for who gets that job offer. To be explicit, I am not saying you should hire someone because they have marginalized identities. What I am suggesting though, is that we take a look at our search processes and assess them for inclusion, intersectionality, and authenticity. Who are we inviting to campus, who are they meeting while here, how much exposure are they getting beyond campus, and can they see themselves moving here? Invite the killjoys to the table during these processes, because in giving the most honest reflections to your candidates, we are setting whoever does come here up for success. We cannot continue to invite people into harmful spaces without also connecting them to killjoys who can mentor them, guide them, and help them navigate predominantly white and/or cis spaces.

**Students: The 360-degree Ramifications**

The last aspect of killjoy identity I want to address is the ways in which it impacts our students. I take a 360-degree approach to supporting undergraduates, which is a double-edged sword. Because I know I can learn just as much from them as they might learn from me, I give them extremely high levels of trust and agency. In return, they get an authentic and genuine version of me, which can at times get me into trouble. As a trans person, for example, fashion is extremely important to me. Where a cis white woman can compliment a student’s cardigan without it drawing much attention, when I do it there is usually a formal documentation and complaint process. Something a lot of colleagues me is, “Why don’t you just stop?” to which I have to reply, “Stop being trans? Queer? Stop being myself?”
What do you mean?” and the look of confusion that follows is exactly why this article needs to exist in the first place.

At this point, you’re probably wondering – does the author walk the walk, or just talk the talk? (we can unpack the ableist origins and connotations of that phrase in another piece). To give you a sense of how I am putting these reflections and considerations into practice, here’s a short list of ways I have centered marginalized students and colleagues in the last few months: I helped a first-year trans student become a conference presenter using my prior connection to the conference and my expertise in how to best submit a successful proposal; I have recruited queer and trans voices to help with another panel at the same conference; I bought my students Dunkin Donuts when they were asked to engage with departmental initiatives at early hours; I helped a queer, woman-identified student get into a study abroad program in a STEM field (which we know are historically dominated by cis straight men); and I reached out to a new woman-identified coworker and have checked in with her at least once weekly to attempt to increase her sense of belonging.

If you nurture the killjoys in your life, you and your students will benefit in the long term. There will be discomfort. There will be new ways of thinking or resolving conflict. There will be harm and mistakes. But there will also be immense growth and opportunity for the most marginalized and disenfranchised students to finally find that elusive sense of belonging. I am acutely aware that I didn’t have to do any of the things I listed in the previous paragraph, but one of the core themes I have learned when talking to and researching other killjoys is that we go above and beyond out of an intrinsic desire to help. We have felt powerless for much of our careers and we directly combat that by doing tangible actions that give us a sense of control and/or contentedness. I can’t help a student navigate paying $100,000 in loans but I can give them a book off of my shelf they’ve been eyeing. I cannot solve food insecurity on campus but I can take a student for coffee instead of a formal meeting in my concrete, windowless office. Killjoys are always going to nurture and protect others, so I’m writing this article in the hopes that others begin to protect and support us as well.

Resolution

As I stated at the beginning of this piece, I alone cannot “solve” any of the issues raised in this article: racism, colonialism, sexism, transphobia, worldwide genocide, and climate change, etc. If we set out to do this, we set ourselves up for failure. Unless you have a billion dollars and/or political power, you aren’t going to even come close to being able to save the world. However, my journey should help show you that small and intentional interactions in your own communities can make a hugely positive and sustainable impact in addressing these issues, starting conversations that bridge people together, and generally work to make the world a better place – while knowing we cannot fix it in our lifetimes.

The desire to help; to be a killjoy. That is what higher education needs more of. Our students are depending on it.

The future of higher education is depending on it.