

OPINION

“Just the Way It Is” in Student Affairs – But Not the Way It Has to Be

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After 18 years as a student affairs professional, I am now headed in a different direction. By this time next year I will be a first-year student in the master of divinity program at Boston University School of Theology. The personal lessons that I have learned about balance over the past two decades are very similar to others that appear in this issue, so I will not repeat them here. All the recommendations of the other authors are good ones, and I wish I had learned some of them sooner. Instead of focusing on personal lessons, I offer some structural observations, and – with respect, as I leave the profession – a challenge as well.

Every personal story in this issue starts from the assumption that student affairs work simply requires more than most people can give and remain healthy. The hours are long and the work is frequently stressful. Of course, the work is also satisfying and rewarding in other ways, or no one would stick with it. That is “just the way it is” in student affairs, we believe, and any student affairs professional worthy of career advancement will give 110% to the cause. Make that 150% in August, October, and April. We all remember times when we just had to keep going until the work was done, and no matter that we were exhausted. The students deserved our best, and we gave it. The challenge, we assume, is to give ourselves permission to carve out a space within an overlong workweek for personal renewal.

Even the summer months do not provide a respite for many of us. A friend of mine once described student affairs work during the fall and spring semesters as “driving down Highway 81 at night in a blinding rainstorm at 85 miles per hour with your headlights off.” Summer is a little better, he said. It is like “driving down Highway 81 at night in a blinding rainstorm at 85 miles per hour with your headlights ON” (G. Kowalski, personal communication).

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While this is “the way it is” in student affairs, I do not believe that this is the way it has to be, at least most of the time, and putting the responsibility on graduate students and young professionals to balance this unbalanced equation is unethical in my view. It is the responsibility of senior administrators, I believe, to make the tough choices to bring balance into student affairs work.

Student leaders and paraprofessionals are not likely to develop the skills necessary for a balanced life so long as we expect RAs to work 30-40 hours per week while successfully completing 15 credit hours of coursework. It is not likely that graduate students preparing to enter our profession will have any semblance of balance in their lives so long as we, as faculty members and GA supervisors, continue to structure study and work experiences that require 18 or more hours of work in a day. It is not likely that entry-level student activities professionals will learn to balance their personal and professional lives when we offer them no personal time, and when they spend all day, every day with people with whom they cannot ethically establish a personal relationship. It is not likely that mid level professionals will invest enough time in supportive and lasting home lives when we offer career advancement only to those who manage to complete Ph.D.s while also working more than 40 hours per week.

This issue is easier to see, perhaps, when we consider another profession – medicine. Medical interns work terribly long hours for very low pay, and recent research suggests that patient care suffers because of this. The arguments that teaching hospitals advance to support the present system sound either like the psychology of hazing (“I had to do this when I was an intern, and now I get to make you do it, too”) or like the economics of slavery (“We cannot afford to hire and supervise enough interns to make the hours shorter”). Each of these arguments is frequently covered by a broader assertion about education (“These new physicians should not complain about long hours; instead, they should be grateful to us because they are receiving an education that will prepare them well for their future practice of medicine”). Whatever the defense, the result is the same – I still do not want to be treated in an emergency room by an intern who has not slept in 30 hours.

Our arguments in student affairs in favor of long work hours for entry-level staff are similar to those of teaching hospitals: “I worked 60, 70, or more hours a week when I started out in student affairs. I can’t believe these young professionals think they can say no to this expectation.” “Our budget just won’t allow us to hire enough RAs to make the actual duty load only 20 hours a week or less.” “GAs are experiencing exactly the same responsibilities and problems they will have as new professionals. It is an unmatched preparation for them as they enter the profession.” In the end, I believe our students receive poorer service than they deserve because staff members are

overworked, just as the patients of medical interns receive inferior medical care. I would argue, however, that we have an obligation to revise this system simply because it is a disservice to our employees, even if our students were not disadvantaged at all by having exhausted hall directors and organization advisors.

I acknowledge that not every position in student affairs has unreasonable hours. My personal observation is that the problem is most acute at the lower and middle levels of the profession, and in some specialty areas more than others. Recent research (Hirt, Kirk, McGuire, Mount, & Nelson-Hensley, 2003) suggests that there are significant differences by institutional type as well. But the problem is real and serious for some. Those who respond to student crises in the middle of the night, those who regularly clean up from late-night concerts, and those who advise student organizations that meet night after night need more than permission to sleep-in the next day. They need some help. So the first step is to assess specifically which employees at each institution are working too much. The actual number may be far fewer than we suspect. The next step is to set the very highest priority on funding new positions in those overworked areas.

I am convinced that we set a lower priority on staff workload than it deserves because it is an unexamined assumption on which our budgets are built. It is too easy to run right past the warning signs because we believe that this is "just the way it is" in student affairs. At every institution where I have worked, the graduate school has a limit of 20 hours of work per week for graduate assistants. At those same institutions, graduate assistant hall directors are routinely assigned duty rotations that require far more than 20 hours of work, and that is before a student crisis occurs. That is "just the way it is" for hall directors. The graduate school limits of 20 hours of work per week for GAs are there for good reason, however. Our graduate students, just like students who work in chemistry labs, have homework to do and friends to meet and a need for sleep. We need to challenge our underlying assumption that the way things are in student affairs is also the way they must be.

I believe that every institution could change the workload of overworked graduate students and new professionals, if administrators saw this as a necessity rather than as a luxury. My experience is that this sort of revised valuation occurs when a voice from the outside insists on it. I recall a time when older residence halls did not have sprinkler systems. I have heard university administrators on more than one campus argue that all the halls met building codes that were appropriate for their age and that, in any case, it would be cost-prohibitive to modify the older buildings to meet newer standards. Then students died in a residence hall fire in some other state, and legislators mandated that sprinklers be installed in all halls. The idea that it would be cost-prohibitive to modify the older buildings no longer applied,

because an outside voice had insisted that balancing institutional budgets at the risk of students' lives was not appropriate.

We can imagine a similar scenario in the case of workload. Suppose legislators or accrediting agencies insisted that it is not appropriate to balance institutional budgets at the cost of unbalancing the lives of our employees. In that case we would certainly find a way to fund the necessary additional positions. While an external mandate would force this reevaluation, I would much prefer that this re-examination begin from within our profession.

In my view, our responsibility to create sustainable working conditions stands alongside, or even ahead of, the employee's responsibility to care for himself or herself in matters of work-life balance, and I hope that we can come to this realization without being forced to do so by others. As I leave student affairs, I respectfully challenge all of our professional associations to begin a new conversation. We should be talking not only about how individuals can eke out some time for themselves and their friends or families in a workweek that is too long and too stressful, but also about our ethical responsibility as employers to establish staffing patterns that make such difficult choices rare.

Reference

Hirt, J. B., Kirk, G. R., McGuire, L. M., Mount, T. P., & Nelson-Hensley, S. M. (2003). How student affairs administrators spend their time: Differences by institutional setting. *The College Student Affairs Journal*, 22, 7-26.