

## Creating Sustainable Careers in Student Affairs: What Ideal Worker Norms Get Wrong and How to Make It Right

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Many student affairs professionals agree that it is difficult to successfully balance personal and work responsibilities without compromising something. Expectations of working outside typical business hours, crisis management duties, live-on positions, and the varying levels of flexibility across the organization shape the ability to meet life's shifting priorities and increasing demands of student affairs work. We have all participated in webinars or staff meetings about combatting burnout or compassion fatigue, with the primary takeaways focusing on self-care strategies. Rarely do we spend time analyzing the systemic, cultural norms that perpetuate burnout, compassion fatigue, attrition from the field, and the other troubling signs that seem to plague this profession. Instead of continuously adapting oneself, what if there was a way to re-imagine the field of student affairs where the domains of personal life and career could be effortlessly integrated? A field that saw less attrition due to lack of support and unrealistic workplace expectations? The student affairs field calls for holistic support for students; increasingly, literature is emerging that urges the same holistic support be extended to professionals, challenging the exploitative culture that pervades the field.

*Creating Sustainable Careers in Student Affairs: What Ideal Worker Norms Get Wrong and How to Make It Right*, edited by Margaret W. Salley, compiles the voices of dozens of practitioners and faculty members in the field to give a thorough analysis of the ideal worker norms in our profession's culture. This book calls out harmful yet familiar working conditions in student affairs and provides an introductory framework on how to break the cycle of professional socialization in student affairs. The contributing authors emphasize practical recommendations for all

career levels, such as applying boundary theory to achieve work-life integration for graduate students, mid-level managers, and senior student affairs officers (SSAOs). Beyond individual accountability recommendations, the authors also reiterate the importance of collaborative, community-care efforts to implement true change. Additionally, the book dedicates chapters to the complex relationship between student affairs' working conditions and social identities to unveil how gender, classism, racism, and heteronormativity define the ideal worker and create additional barriers for marginalized practitioners to fit the professional mold. The combination of introductory material, practical examples, and the attention to identity intersecting workplace issues make this book a must-read for all practitioners.

Two concepts are central to the book: *work-life integration* and *ideal worker norms*. The term work-life integration is used throughout the book in place of the more commonly heard phrase work-life balance. The concept is an intentional effort by the contributors to move away from the idea of needing personal and work responsibilities to be in balance to feel satisfied. Instead, the term work-life integration attempts to recognize that not only is a perfect balance rare, but it also may not be necessary depending on the individual (see Isdell & Wolf-Wendel, p. 17). The emphasis on integration underscores the idea that one's personal commitments and work responsibilities should not compete but instead be seen as intersecting aspects of one's life.

The second concept, ideal worker norms, serves as the book's central focus. Workplace norms in student affairs are based on the concept of an ideal worker—that is, someone who can dedicate themselves entirely to their job without distractions or competing responsibilities, such as familial duties (see Sallee, p. 5). Such norms may include expecting staff to return phone calls or respond to emails outside normal office hours or while on leave or that they are in the office during typical work hours despite working evenings and weekends. Only the ideal worker can consistently meet such expectations without issue. The concept of ideal worker norms was chosen as the book's focus precisely because it is so pervasive in the profession but also rarely discussed in any explicit way.

The book focuses on the harm that ideal worker norms create for individual workers and the field in general. Moreover, the expectation of someone being completely devoted to work is rooted in ableist, classist, heteronormative, gendered conceptions of paid work in a capitalist society. The ideal worker norm is grounded in the traditional expectation that the employee is a White cis-man who can exploit the free labor of a stay-at-home spouse to take care of all other life responsibilities, including preparing food, cleaning, and attending to familial duties (see Sallee,

p. 6). As such, ideal worker norms marginalize employees whose very identities challenge these expectations. These include our classmates and colleagues of color (see Jones Boss & Bravo, p. 201), those in the queer community (see Kortegast, p. 179), those from low socioeconomic backgrounds (see Ardoin, p. 218), those who identify as female (see Marshall, p. 277), and those who are parents, particularly fathers striving to be involved in their children's lives (see Sallee et al., pp. 239, 257). Ideal worker norms contribute to stress and high rates of turnover for all employees, especially those whose very identities preclude them from being ideal workers.

When the ideal worker norm cannot be achieved, employees struggle to balance the competing priorities of life and work. Hirschy and Staten write, "The pulls of multiple obligations at home and work intensify if the work environment ignores the complex relationships among employee's personal commitments. Demands from one's personal life change over time; sometimes predictable, sometimes not" (p. 89). The push to prioritize work over self begins when practitioners enter the cycle of professional socialization in graduate school. Such socialization demands that graduate students dedicate time to meeting the requirements of assistantships, internships, and academic programs to advance career marketability over their own needs (see Perez, p. 148).

Our primary critique of the book rests on the limitations of boundary theory for supporting work-life integration among the graduate student and entry-level populations. The recommendations for combatting graduate student socialization into the ideal worker norm were reliant on supervisors' and mid-level managers' recognition of and willingness to dismantle that norm. For example, the recommendation that graduate students "should begin to establish boundaries related to irregular schedules and clarify supervisor's expectations" (Stubbs, p. 81) only works if supervisors are respectful of those boundaries. The dependence on the flexibility of individual supervisors to break this cycle of socialization seems inadequate. We feel additional conversations are needed to provide graduate students tools for navigating supervisory relationships and workplace politics early in their careers, especially when encountering inflexible supervisors.

The inadequacy of boundary setting is underscored by the complexity of desocialization among mid-level professionals and SSAOs and the need to acknowledge different generational perspectives on work and professionalism. Considering the extensive amount of time they have worked in the field and the decades of socialization they have personally experienced, we feel that the cycle is more difficult to break away from than the authors acknowledge. To discontinue the current structure in student affairs and achieve consistent work-life integration for all levels of staff, mid-level managers and SSAOs must identify behaviors that

contribute to the cycle of harmful ideal worker norms and reevaluate the standards of professionalism that allowed them to advance in their own careers.

## **Who Should Read This Book?**

Mid-level practitioners seem to be the primary audience for this book, particularly regarding the most tangible ways to apply the concepts and disrupt ideal worker norms. Mid-level managers hold considerable power at an individual level to create consistency among other supervisors like themselves. We believe a review from the mid-level perspective would be beneficial to see if the approaches suggested in the book are practical with respect to supervisory positions.

Yet, SSAOs are the most readily able to make institutional-level changes and promote the transition away from ideal worker norms within the field through resource allocation and policy creation and through collaboration with other SSAOs. While reading the book, we encourage SSAOs to reflect on the culture of their departments and institutions and to collaborate with other staff members to create consistency across supervisors, ensuring that actions match written policy.

Faculty in higher education and student affairs (HESA) programs, especially those with graduate assistantship requirements, should consider incorporating the text into introductory graduate coursework. As graduate practitioners ourselves, we would recommend this book be infused into HESA program curricula as part of introductory courses during their first semester. Specifically, Chapter 5, “Problematizing Socialization in Student Affairs Graduate Training” by Rosemary J. Perez, would provide graduate students with validation and practical strategies for early discussions with supervisors about the flexibility needed to successfully integrate personal, academic, and work responsibilities.

Both graduate students and newer professionals would benefit from reading the first five chapters and engaging in self-reflection of specific habits that fuel the cycle of socialization and continuation of the ideal worker norm. We believe the awareness gained of ideal worker norms will assist in implementing a re-imagined workplace office culture. Emerging professionals and new employees can use this awareness to identify pockets of autonomy that exist in their positions and implement strategies for disrupting the ideal worker norm for their own students or staff. Those who supervise undergraduate students should consider using the leadership development activities in Chapter 3, “Work-Life Integration in Student Affairs” by Amy S. Hirschy and Shannon D. Staten, as part of training or ongoing supervision activities. Specifically, student leaders in orientation, residence life, or

other functional areas where the student staff mentor or support other students would benefit from having a full-time professional help them establish physical, temporal, psychological, and behavioral boundaries to navigate complex work environments.

## **Reviewers' Personal Application of Content**

Since reading *Creating Sustainable Careers in Student Affairs*, we have become more aware of the ideal worker norms that have been ingrained within us and that surround us. We have more readily identified language and cultural expectations that perpetuate these norms and have been able to pause and course-correct when we catch ourselves enacting those expectations (i.e., sending emails after hours or scheduling meetings over lunch). The presence of ideal worker norms is much more apparent, but we also feel more prepared to respond to or articulate suggestions to break the norms.

As a result of reading the book, we have changed the way we communicate expectations with undergraduate student staff and how we present ourselves in conversations. Before setting task deadlines, we now ask students to calculate study hours and break times, emphasizing that free time is not the same as availability. We also make sure we do not lead conversations with acknowledgments of our own busyness in order to disrupt this aspect of the socialization process for undergraduate student leaders.

## **Conclusion**

*Creating Sustainable Careers in Student Affairs* was released in December 2020, at the end of a universally challenging year, and has already shifted and inspired conversations in the student affairs field. While we were reading and beginning the process of writing this review, we saw many sessions on Spring 2021 conference programs referencing the book and promoting dialogue about ideal worker norms. We are confident that this book is going to continue making waves in student affairs, particularly because of the higher levels of burnout being reported due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In a field that has historically promoted conditions that overwork and exploit the compassion of its professionals, this book skillfully articulates the unsustainability of the norms we should have never accepted in the first place. We recommend reading *Creating Sustainable Careers in Student Affairs* to learn how to enact change on an individual and institutional level and to anticipate changes in the field as these topics continue to gain momentum.