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# Resisting the “Do More with Less” Culture in Higher Education and Student Affairs

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# Resisting the “Do More with Less” Culture in Higher Education & Student Affairs



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Delia Cheung Hom joined Northeastern in June 2006 to serve as the Assistant Director for the Asian American Center. She is currently serving as the Center's second director. Before joining the staff of the AAC, Delia worked in student affairs at the University of California, Riverside (UCR). She served as the Graduate Intern for Student Organizations for one year, and served as a Program Coordinator in Asian Pacific Student Programs for four years.

## **OiYan Poon**

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The fields of higher education and student affairs (HESA) tend to attract educators committed to serving and supporting students through their developmental needs. Though service to students is an important value, we question an increasing culture among HESA professionals to sacrifice our own humanity in service to students and the profession. As self-care talk among student affairs professionals (SAPros) has increased, there remains little to no recognition of the ways academic capitalism, as defined by Slaughter and Rhoades (2010), seeks to exploit our human capital for the goals of market efficiencies and economic profit regardless of organizational mission. As a senior institutional administrator shared in one of our doctoral classes, “without [financial] margin, there can be no mission.” Many of us may have entered this profession with noble goals in mind, but make no mistake, we are all workers within organizations bound by demands of capitalism. Still, we often hear quips like “Well, I didn’t enter the field for the money.” Do casual comments like this convey a deeper culture among SAPros that positions us for labor exploitation? During times of budget cuts, which tend to also reflect hard times for students, we understand we must try to “do more with less.”

Through this research in brief (RIB), we call upon our fellow HESA professionals and educators to recognize how capitalism in higher education seeks to exploit our humanity for profit and to collectively resist the ever-increasing neoliberal values in higher education (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2010). In other words, we must combat the hegemonic organizational culture in higher education to accept labor exploitation as “service” through a mantra of “do more with less.” We reject the idea that success in the HESA professions should be defined by people sacrificing their humanity in service to students, our workplaces, or the higher education industry at large. Through short personal narratives, we trouble the hegemonic culture of service and sacrifice that obscures the hegemonic culture of exploitative capitalism, even in the academy that is often imagined as an enlightened place (Stockdill & Danico, 2012). We end this RIB

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by offering participatory action research (PAR) as a potentially transformative and collective approach to HESA work.

### **Do you live to work, or do you work to live?**

**OiYan.** Teaching in graduate programs preparing next generations of HESA professionals, I often ask students “Do you live to work, or do you work to live?” The question is intended to engage students in deep self-reflection about their values of work and quality of life, challenging them to articulate their understanding of labor relations in higher education. Occasionally, I have come across students who seem to forget, or not even realize, that they are workers within an exploitative capitalist system.

As a doctoral student, I realized I had forgotten my humanity within the invisible structures of academic capitalism, until a serendipitous casual interaction helped me emotionally remember and begin valuing my humanity. On a sunny southern California day, as I walked across campus, I was blessed to cross paths with Dr. Hune, who was a Dean of Graduate Studies at the time. She asked me, “How are you doing?” I responded by telling her that I had completed my coursework and was deep into preparing for my comprehensive examination, completing data collection for a grant-funded project for one professor, how I was considering adding a second research job with another professor, and mentoring undergraduate student activists. As I rattled off all of my projects, Dr. Hune stopped me mid-sentence, and said “I didn’t ask you *what* you were doing. I asked ‘*How are you?*’” The re-asking of the question took my breath away, and I was speechless. I did not know how to answer the mundane question “How are you?” and I began to tear up with emotion. I couldn’t remember the last time a professor, university administrator, or anyone had asked me that question with sincerity, or saw me as more than my labor.

**Delia.** As an Asian American woman working in traditionally white institutions, I often feel exhausted and overwhelmed. In an effort to address this,



Image by Heather Eidson

to explore what this means on a collective level, I was recently a part of a conversation with a small cohort of Asian Americans working in spaces that aim to provide support to Asian American college students. In this space, we checked in, and asked open-ended questions about what our challenges are in our work. As people slowly began to open up, the responses took on a recurring theme: Our students struggle with not being labeled as under-represented minorities, and therefore lack access to institutional resources and support. Our students are struggling with mental health. Our students... Our students... *Our students.*

I do not question my colleagues' commitment to our students. Working in a traditionally white institution, I know what it feels like when our community is overlooked, and when the diverse narratives of our students are ignored. I know that my colleagues are committed to our students. We wouldn't be in this work if we were not.

However, I was surprised at how hard it was to engage in a conversation about us. What do we need as people doing this work? What struggles are we faced with? What challenges do we face? Why are we not surrounded by people, especially our colleagues, who can genuinely ask us that simple question, "How are you?" It is this loneliness and feeling of invisibility that hurts. Many of us as HESA professionals work daily to support our students. What does it mean when we as Asian Pacific Islander and Desi American (APIDA) professionals working in this space do not feel supported?

This work is exhausting. I feel tired on many levels. I am emotionally drained from being one of few on campus that our students can trust to hear their stories. I am tired because I try to enter spaces for

my own professional development, only to feel excluded. I do not want to step up and take on roles to help address the implicit, and sometimes explicit, white supremacy that pervades these spaces. I feel a sense of responsibility to be a mentor to younger professionals in the field because I know how lost I felt when there was no one who looked like me to mentor me. We need space to have these conversations. I need time in my life to have these conversations.

And we need support from others in our professional and personal lives to make this space.

### Doing "the work" Differently: Toward a Transformative HESA Praxis

When our lives become so defined by our work and labor, it's no wonder some have observed a growing "cult of busy" (Dickinson, 2016). Although this culture values productivity over happiness and health, how busy we are is often rewarded as a status symbol within a society defined by capitalism (Pinsker, 2017). In various SAPro social circles, we have seen this cult of busy in exclamations of how many hours we worked in the last week (with no overtime pay) that are sometimes met with understanding, perhaps implicit awe, and other times responses that reveal an underlying competitiveness (e.g., You worked 60 hours last week? You're lucky. I had to work 80 last week!) over who's busier. Why do we engage in what seems like implicit celebrations of labor exploitation in the Ivory Tower? Are our accomplishments defined by the hours we clock in at work? What do these hours spent say about the quality and impact of our work? More importantly, what does it say about how we neglect our own wellness, development and humanity? Why do we put work above our individual and shared humanity?

We need to problematize the capitalistic culture of martyrdom found in HESA professions. We cannot be so committed to the work or "our students" that we would sacrifice our own humanity. We are not asking the profession to define "our students" as work or to place their needs in opposition to ours. Instead, in partnership with colleagues and students we want to find ways to do our work differently, and to hold our

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institutions accountable to actualizing humanistic education missions and processes over fiscal margins.

In our *JCSHESA* article, we offered an initial exploration of the possibilities of participatory action research (PAR) to transform student affairs work in higher education. Although our initial experiment with PAR did not yield success as we had originally envisioned it, the project still allowed us to engage in critiques of structural conditions in higher education that reproduce a cult of busy. It brought into focus that higher education, its noble mission notwithstanding, is an industry that is part and parcel to the reproduction of capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2010) and even the basest forms of human exploitation – slavery (Wilder, 2013).

Many of us chose the profession to serve a greater good and a love for serving students and community. We need a paradigm shift in resisting rising neoliberalism in higher education. We need to love and reclaim our humanity in order to engage in transformative social justice work through collective communities that nurture us and hold each other accountable in resisting academic capitalism. As Anzaldúa (1993) stated:

The struggle is inner: Chicano, Indio, American Indian, Mojado, Mexicano, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian—our psyches resemble the bordertowns and are populated by the same people. The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the “real” world unless it first happens in the images in our heads. (p. 81)

Similar to Anzaldúa, Boggs (2008) also advocated for radical transformation toward a more humanized future, in explaining that “A revolution involves making an evolutionary/revolutionary leap towards becoming more socially responsible and more self-critical human beings. In order to transform the world, we must transform ourselves” (p. viii). In this transformative framework of scholarship and praxis, PAR offers possibilities to build toward more just and humanized work conditions in higher education and student affairs.



*Image by Heather Eidson*