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Debunking the Myth of Job Fit in Higher Education and Student Affairs (Book Review)

Reece, B.J., Tran, V.T., DeVore, E.N., & Porcaro, G. (2019). *Debunking the Myth of Job in Higher Education and Student Affairs*. Sterling, VA: Stylus. 264 pp. ISBN: 978-1-62036-788-9. \$35.00 suggested retail price.

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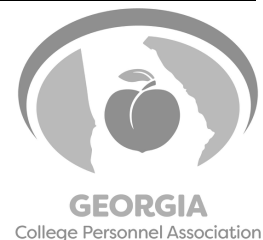
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The recently published text, *Debunking the Myth of Job Fit in Higher Education and Student Affairs*, challenges the concept of job fit in student affairs. Editors Brian J. Reece, Vu T. Tran, Elliott N. DeVorre, and Gabby Porcaro bring together authors representing a wide variety of student affairs functional areas in an effort to reframe and more clearly define the concept of fit within the field of student affairs. The chapter authors (including the editors) share personal narratives and critically explore the concept of job fit as it applies to the intersectionality of their identities.

As current faculty members with a collective 39 years of practitioner experience and 17 years as full-time faculty members, the concept of fit is something that has been used throughout each of our respective careers, beginning with our own searches for graduate preparation programs in student affairs. We have been candidates for positions where we felt the fit was there and also when it most definitely was not. As hiring authorities in student affairs, we have discussed what we were looking for in a candidate and how each candidate fits our departmental and institutional culture. We have discussed fit with the graduate students we teach as

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they embark on their own internship and job search processes. So, when we learned that ACPA (the professional organization in which the three of us are actively involved) was co-publishing this book, we were eager to see how this concept of fit would be further explored and defined. Is fit truly a myth? Is fit a myth for some, and not for others? What about fit would we be “debunked” and in what ways would it challenge our thoughts and practices?

The book begins with a chapter entitled *From Fit to Belonging: New Dialogues on the Student Affairs Job Search*. In this editor-authored chapter, the purpose of the book is described as a means “to catalyze conversation about the use of job fit as an uncriticized tool for exclusion in student affairs by exploring the concept through multiple frameworks, lenses, and standpoints” (Reece et al., 2019, p. 3). Each of the remaining chapters provide detailed personal narratives that examine job fit from the perspective of class, race, gender, and sexual identity. They explore the ways policies, procedures, environments, and campus cultural norms can provide and promote inequalities in the workplace and during the job search process for individuals from marginalized populations.

Reflection and Takeaways

As we read this book, we are reminded of our calling as student affairs professionals and transformative educators that we must intentionally and systematically interpret and reinterpret our organizations and practices to “...understand how the organizational culture impedes creation of a caring, democratic community” (Rhoads & Black, 1995, p. 420). To this end, to best reflect on the book, *Debunking the Myth of Job in Higher Education and Student Affairs*, we intentionally collaborated as faculty and scholar-practitioners to critique the book from our lived experiences in the field and then synthesize the emerging themes from our takeaways.

We appreciated reading *Debunking the Myth of Job Fit in Higher Education and Student Affairs* as it begins the overdue conversation about job fit within the profession. This notion of fit is ubiquitous throughout student affairs, from the grad student beginning their job search, to the seasoned professional exploring next steps in their career, to the search committees and hiring managers at universities. Reece, Tran, DeVore, and Porcaro do an excellent job of defining fit, situating it within the context of a socially just profession, and challenging the ambiguity of fit to justify hiring practices.

Debunking the Myth of Job Fit in Higher Education and Student Affairs opens

the door to larger conversations about the racist mechanisms and white privilege that are still inherent within higher education and specifically in job search processes. Highlighted throughout this book, the chapter authors show us how the concept of fit, as used here, does have diabolical oppressive roots that need to be brought to light and dismantled by those who have the power to do so.

More than anything, this book made us think about how the concept of fit is applied within the job search process. We may have used the concept of “fit” to raise concerns about a candidate who, for whatever reason, was not “what we had in mind” by challenging the very thought of what it was that we did have in mind. Is the concept of “fit” used to shy away from our own opportunities because it was out of our comfort zones? We particularly appreciated the insights shared related to the intersectionality of fit and social justice that will not only challenge the current practices of search committees but also those who hold leadership positions within student affairs. A great illustration of this convergence is found in *Chapter 5: No We Can't Meet You for an \$8 Coffee*. This chapter illustrates the ways that class infiltrates the profession and further reinforces the hierarchy of socio-economic status. The authors examine the intersectionality of cost and power dynamics

associated with class. We are reminded that despite having good intentions, our actions can cause harm in ways we never would have imagined. This chapter teaches us to be mindful of how something as simple and well-intended as a request for coffee can be interpreted.

In addition, throughout our reading of the book we found ourselves challenging our own concepts of fit. The title of *Chapter 4: Holograms, Misfits, and Authentic Selves*, particularly stood out to us and we were excited to see how the chapter authors, Bennett, York, Bailey, Habermann-Guthrie, Wenoa, Wells, and Yamaguch, would make use of the cartoon *Jem and the Holograms* as a vehicle to explore the topic of fit. While the 80s kid inside us loved these nostalgic references, the educator inside appreciated the questions raised within this chapter related to challenging the status quo, being asked to be something we are not, and when to be your authentic self. Can we truly be our authentic selves all the time, even in a field as embracing as student affairs? Are there times we put up holograms? When are there situations when a misfit is needed? These are all questions that are important to ask ourselves during the job search process that come from this chapter.

Other chapters are equally powerful, touching on the areas of case law (Chapter 2), providing recommendations for hiring

managers to avoid discriminatory practices (Chapter 3), hearing about the realities faced by women of color (Chapter 6), the exclusionary nature of PWIs through coded language (Chapter 7), the biases and “collusion” associated with institutional cisgenderism (Chapter 8), and examining Whiteness within higher education, confronting it in hiring practices, and exploring ways to become racially aware/cognizant (Chapter 9). The final chapter (10) ties it all together and provides a challenge by author Walter Parish III to student affairs professionals to keep these discussions at the forefront.

Overall, Reece, Tran, DeVorre, and Porcaro have compiled a book that made us think, and more importantly, question and reflect on what fit really means not just to us, but to all members of the student affairs profession. It made us question conversations we have had and will have with our students, and rethink how we may have (mis)used the concept of fit as former hiring authorities and job-searchers ourselves. As faculty members who teach those who will become job seekers and who have chaired and served on countless hiring committees, the stories shared and the recommendations provided by each of the chapters’ authors are things we will infuse into future hiring practices and incorporate into our curriculum. We will refocus our conversations around “fit” with job-searchers to conversations around putting

up holograms, being a misfit, and being authentic selves. While “fit” is something that has been part of our process, it may not work for theirs.

We found this text useful in a variety of capacities. We will use it in our classes and/or discussions with job-seekers. We recommend that those embarking on the job search, both new and seasoned professionals, read it and discuss it with mentors. We recommend hiring committees read it before they begin a search process. Lastly, this book would make a great selection for a division of student affairs to read and discuss/debate, as it may foster engaged dialogue where meaningful change can happen.

Conclusion

We found *Debunking the Myth of Job in Higher Education and Student Affairs* to be a compelling and insightful text and we agree with the authors that the ambiguity of fit is often used to justify maligned hiring decisions and in doing so it further perpetuates inequalities in the staffing practices within higher education. As Quaye notes in the foreword (p. xiii), “we cannot keep using fit to describe other things we are refusing to name.” While we agree wholeheartedly with his statement, it is important to not be so broad with our interpretation of “fit” that it does not apply at all. For that reason, we

believe there is still something to be said for the concept of fit.

The editors provide a great definition of fit used by Brene Brown (2010) in *The Gifts of Imperfection*. She says “fitting in is about assessing the situation and becoming who you need to be to be accepted” (p. 25) but we are not sure that is the way fit is or should be defined in all situations of the job search. From a job seeker perspective, we firmly believe the culture of the environment has a significant impact not only on their potential for professional success, but also their personal happiness. We think it is prudent for professionals to actively seek out a rich understanding of the institutional culture, departmental norms and expectations, and the general characteristics of the student body they’ll be serving.

Some of the ideas associated with fit, that gut feeling you get from an experience or encounter, that sense you have when you set foot on a campus, meet and interact with the individuals employed there, learn about

the values, culture, etc., have its merits in the job search process. Should fit be, as Brown states, something that we need to change? Is fit about “becoming who you need to be to be accepted” (2010, p. 25), or is it more about making sure that the place is right for who you are at that moment in time? These are questions about fit that still should be asked. It is for this reason that we are not fully convinced that the myths surrounding the concept of fit were “debunked” after reading this book. However, *Debunking the Myth of Job in Higher Education and Student Affairs* does provide us with a critical lens through which we should view fit in all facets of the job search process. It also gives voice to the real struggles that our colleagues from marginalized populations face each day in the job search process. As leaders and educators in student affairs, this book should challenge us to rethink our concepts and practices and push us to begin to dismantle the oppressive constructs that still exist in the field.

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