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## Finding Health and Happiness the Write Way: Blogging as Self-Care Within Student Affairs and Higher Education

Melissa Carlson

*Blogging has its roots in journal writing and has risen in popularity as a form of self-care practice. As the modern day diary, blogs are a medium through which authors can share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences with peers in the form of self-disclosure. Unlike the key-locked diaries of the past, blogs provide student affairs practitioners with the unique opportunity for reader feedback in the form of commentary. The give-and-take between blog authors and their readers has been associated with many physical and psychological benefits that go far beyond the keyboard. Many higher education professionals have already begun tapping into these benefits and are finding camaraderie through reading and writing blogs. Practitioners seeking community and an outlet for self-disclosure should consider blogging as a form of self-care.*

Forms of self-care are as numerous and diverse as the number of people who practice them; they run the gamut from extreme workouts to binge-baking sessions. One form of self-care has its roots in the not so distant past. From padlocked diaries to leather-bound journals, writing has been providing cathartic release for people of all ages since long before the Facebook revolution. Where teenagers once confided their crushes to blue-lined pages, professionals are now able to share their thoughts and processes with audiences of like-minded peers. “Dear Diary” may have been replaced by hashtags and emoji, but the benefits of writing as a form of self-care are still present in today’s online blogs.

Blogging began with Dave Winer’s Scripting News around 1997; since then, blogging has become increasingly more accessible, or as Blogger states, “push-button publishing for the people” (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004, p. 222). According to Nardi et al. (2004), there are over 1.3 billion blogging sites, and this number is increasing daily. Blogs have become tools not only for individuals seeking an outlet for self-disclosure, but also for political campaigns, news organizations, businesses, and classrooms. Blogs are often given the blanket term of online diaries, but there are actually three distinct types of blogs. The first two are personal journals and knowledge logs. The third form is a filter blog, which

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is characterized by an author pulling information from outside sources to provide commentary on a particular issue (Nardi et al., 2004).

### **An Overview of Blogging**

Unlike the silent composition books of our past, blogs offer authors a unique opportunity in the form of physically removed self-disclosure. As stated by Ko and Kuo (2009), “self-disclosure is communicating with others using one’s own information, including personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences, for the purpose of sharing” (p.75). Bloggers have the option to share personal information, revelations, and experiences with their audiences, granting them access to a larger support network from the (relative) comfort of their computer screens. Out of the billions of blogs currently online, 70% of them are being utilized as personal journals (Nardi et al., 1997). The motivation to blog differs amongst authors, however it often stems from similar roots. This can include the urge to update others on activities and whereabouts, sway the opinions of others, gain external opinions or feedback, think out loud, and release emotional tension (Nardi et al., 1997). Further research revealed that “bloggers desired readers, but wanted controlled interaction, not the fast-paced give-and-take of face to face or media such as instant messaging” (Nardi et al., 1997, p. 223). Maintaining a blog creates a waypoint between these two types of interaction, allowing authors to express their thoughts and feelings without the social pressure of a face-to-face conversation. Furthermore, authors have control over how readers receive the material. A blogger has the option to respond to commentary or correct misinterpretations when their readers comment.

Many authors have found that blogging is an avenue for disclosure and plays a significant role in the self-discovery process. As one blog author wrote, “I had this voice that I didn’t realize I had until people told me they were reading my blog” (Nardi et al., 1997, p. 224). In this case, the experience of blogging provided the author with both validation and affirmation. These in turn helped this individual to recognize that they have a voice and that it has value. As student affairs professionals, we work to engage students in a very similar process of self-discovery. Establishing a firm sense of self or finding your voice is crucial to identity development; blogging can prove an invaluable resource toward increasing our own self-awareness to better serve students.

Nardi et al. (1997) shared that blogging as a way to “think out loud” can be a powerful tool. This sentiment is aptly labeled “thinking by writing,” and it embeds cognition in a social matrix. Within this model, the blog forms a bridge providing both an avenue for explicit feedback and also the ability to regulate one’s own behavior in the form of writing with a connection to the audience (Nardi et al., 1997). This statement suggests that blogging can be utilized as a way to encourage

authors or their readers to modify behavior or think through commentary and feedback. This form of blogging takes on the dynamic interplay of true dialogue, albeit at a less instantaneous pace, and can prove to be a powerful tool. Authors who utilize their blogs to express views on particular issues as a call to action can become influential instruments for social change within the environment of the college campus.

The final motivation for blogging, to release emotional tension, is referenced as a method of obtaining closure through writing. Nardi et al. (1997) found that releasing emotional tension through self-disclosure with an audience was an extremely powerful experience for the blogger. The type of control present in this type of emotional release cannot always be found in face-to-face interaction. Regardless of whether bloggers sit down to type out their feelings in a frenzy before posting, they have the privacy inherent in the physical removal from an audience. Bloggers have the ability to edit their statements after they are published, something that cannot be accomplished through in-the-moment conversation.

### **Benefits of Blogging**

Rains and Keating (2011) found that blogging can serve as a conduit for stress management in addition to social support. They also acknowledge that dedicated readers who provide encouragement and feedback are a significant factor to bloggers' well-being. Similarly, Ko and Kuo (2009) found that, "self-disclosure may help bloggers to both maintain existing human relations and extend their human network, both of which are considered important to people's 'social capital'" (p.75). In turn, social capital greatly influences a blogger's perception of their well-being. What does this mean for the eight percent of Internet users or 12 million Americans who utilize blogging as a means of self-expression (Rains & Keating, 2011)? It means an ever-growing, dynamic community and audience in which every person feels heard every time they see the "times viewed" counter increase on their page. Blogs have created spaces for student affairs professionals to share their experiences while engaging in dialogue with readers nationwide on topics, personal and professional, which may otherwise be silenced in the chaos of daily responsibilities.

### **The Healing Connection Between Writers and Readers**

Baker and Moore (2008) further emphasize the benefits of blogging for wellbeing by comparing it to the established results of writing in a diary; keeping a journal has been associated with increased coping, improved psychological functioning, and decreased psychological distress. The authors go on to state that, "similar to diaries, blogs can provide catharsis and venting about stress and emotions in daily living" (p. 1). Within the field of higher education, tools for self-care are sorely

needed, and many professionals have already found support and camaraderie in their self-care journey through reading and writing blogs.

Rains and Keating (2011) researched the social dimensions of blogging and discovered that connections can be separated into two distinct categories: strong ties and weak ties. Each type of connection influences psychological and emotional well-being in a significant way. The authors defined family and friends as strong connections because they often provide the majority of social support. Not to be overlooked, weak ties are defined as casual acquaintances that can also aid in well-being and should be viewed as “supporters who lie beyond the primary network of family and friends” (Rains & Keating, 2011, p. 513). The authors go on to say that strong tie relationships have been shown to compliment self-care because they reduce loneliness and stave off depression. However, weak tie relationships are equally crucial components of self-care because people with weaker ties are more likely to offer objective advice and connect based on similar health experiences. Furthermore, Rains and Keating (2011) found that weak ties provide a relationship wherein experiences can be disclosed with little to no risk.

Most blog reader-writer relationships fall into the weak tie category due to the removed nature of blogging. As a result, such relationships are bound by fewer role obligations and social complications (Rains & Keating, 2011). When networks made up of strong tie relationships are either unable or unwilling to offer support to an individual, especially when health is concerned, blogging provides a unique alternative space where people can seek and receive support as well as unbiased feedback without fear of reprisal. Bloggers are able to share their self-care practices and struggles without the added stress of interpreting their readers’ nonverbal responses and reactions; this removal can prevent or alleviate embarrassment and self-consciousness (Rains & Keating, 2011). This can be particularly impactful for student affairs professionals dealing with stigmatized health concerns, such as depression, obesity, and diabetes.

Blogging has been found to be especially useful in combating various physiological health conditions. Rains and Keating (2011) found that individuals struggling with a chronic health concern who began blogging later reported feeling, “more confident in their ability to manage their health condition” (p. 527). This change was attributed to the support that bloggers were receiving from readers who contributed sympathy or feedback to their blog entries. In addition, the camaraderie received from readers was found to aid bloggers in overcoming deficits with support from their strong tie relationships (Rains & Keating, 2011).

In my experience working within residential life, my roles naturally included a significant amount of boundary blurring between home and work. I found establishing good self-care practices to be vital in maintaining balance on both a personal

and professional level. Blogging provides a space outside of both home and work in which student affairs professionals can reach out, decompress through personal journaling, process challenging experiences through filtering, or discuss healthy living practices. Blogging has become a platform for higher education professionals to share and own their experiences and struggles on the path to self-care.

### **Blogging as Self-Care in Higher Education**

There are hundreds of blog sites available to the aspiring writer with the five most popular being *Blogger*, *Tumblr*, *WordPress*, *SquareSpace*, and *Posterous* (Fitzpatrick, 2010). The higher education professional may utilize any one of these sites to share their self-care experiences or may turn to the Student Affairs Fitness blog created by Ed Cabellon (2013) from Bridgewater State University. *Student Affairs Fitness* is a website created by and tailored to practitioners as a space to share self-care advice and foster a community of individuals who are dedicated to healthy living. This is evident in its professed mission to serve “those in student affairs and higher education seeking a community within the profession focused on their personal fitness and health through focuses on good nutrition, positive mental wellness, and physical activity” (Cabellon, 2013, para. 1). The benefit of a blog site like *Student Affairs Fitness* is that it is dedicated to higher education and student affairs professionals, which ensures that its members will be writing to, and seeking support from, a like-minded audience. Those who read and write for the site share a strong tie without ever having to meet face-to-face; they are committed to the same profession, and even way of life, that an education based field such as student affairs requires of its practitioners. *Student Affairs Fitness* and similar blog sites have created an encouraging space for practitioners to share their self-care practices while finding solidarity with their colleagues. Forum with a specific intended or target audience lead to conversations, in the form of commentary, that have a better chance of being constructive and relevant to all participants. This increases the positive benefits of blogging for authors.

In my own journey as a new student affairs professional, I have turned to *Student Affairs Fitness* and personal blogs written by other graduate students. Regardless of whether I know them personally, the words of fellow colleagues resonate with me more so because of our shared connection in the field; they understand and are better able to relate to the intricacies unique to the student affairs profession within higher education as a whole. Reading about the diverse ways in which other professionals have tackled and overcome obstacles and challenges has enabled me to actively reflect upon and change my own professional philosophy. Blogging has been an invaluable resource to me as a medium to connect with other graduate students who are going through similar experiences at institutions and as a way to gain insight from seasoned professionals.

It is evident from Rains and Keating's (2011) research that blogging can be used to aid in, and stand alone as, a form of self-care. Student affairs professionals have already begun turning to blogging sites as a medium through which they can share their experiences, gain advice, and establish a community of individuals dedicated to their emotional and physical well-being. Blogging enables authors to determine the amount of interaction they want with their audience. Blogging can be an added benefit for those within the student affairs profession as it allows for both genuine connection and support, or alternatively provides an arena for anonymous venting if confidentiality is a concern. In a field where it can feel impossible to carve out time for personal well-being, blogging should not be overlooked as a potential step toward better self-care practices among higher education professionals.

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