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Love at the Center: Envisioning What Higher Education Could Be

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Cover Page Footnote

My work was funded by the Emerging Scholars Grant Award from ACPA- College Student Educators, International.

Love at the Center: Envisioning What Higher Education Could Be

Stacey D. Garrett

Extending from a larger autoethnographic project, this scholarly personal narrative will portray one program director's vision for the field of higher education. ACPA's Strategic Imperative for Higher Education framework calls upon practitioners and scholars to start from a place of love. The field of higher education and student affairs was built on operating with an ethic of care. The pressures of a neo-liberal society work to dehumanize members of the field, turning us into cogs in a machine rather than human beings filled with hopes and dreams. This scholarly personal narrative, based on reflections and experiences as instructor and administrator, will present a new mode of operation for practitioners and faculty, rooted in humanity, centered in love and joy, to achieve a collective wholeness and healing for our field.

Keywords: Love, humanity, graduate preparation

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Love at the Center: Envisioning What Higher Education Could Be

Picture it. San Ignacio, Belize. March 2020. I'm sitting in the Belize Botanic Gardens staring at the phone of one of my students reading an email from our university announcing the extension of spring break, and calling for study abroad participants to return to the United States. It's the Wednesday of our spring break and we're all wondering if we'll be cutting our alternative service program short and returning to North Carolina. The questions swirl: what's going on? Are we going to be able to get home? What about our classes? Are they going to cancel my lab course? I can't get off cycle with my courses or I won't graduate on time. Can I get back into the residence halls? I can't just "go home". My home is on campus. What are we supposed to do?

That was the moment when things began to shift for me. The coronavirus pandemic changed everything. For seventeen years, I had operated one way in college settings. Keep going, don't stop, you can do it all, you have to do it all. Overachiever. As a student, as a practitioner, and even as a new faculty member, I was constantly doing. More and more. Always yes. Rarely no. But then the pandemic hit. I guided my students through the remainder of that alternative service program. We made it back to the U.S.; we made it back to campus. We went our separate ways. I went back to my house, not knowing what was happening after being off the grid for a week. The next day, I reviewed my email, updated my students, and let them know alternative plans would be made over the extended break. And then I just sat. Numb. Disoriented. Worrying about toilet paper since I hadn't been grocery shopping in a couple of weeks.

Then one day in April, I woke up and decided. If this is going to be the new normal, working from home, I'm going to embrace this. I'm going to set myself up for success. So, I set up the spare bedroom as an office. I decided to do what I needed to do for me. I decided to take care of myself and face the anxiety I'd been carrying for decades. I decided there had to be a better way to do this work. The pandemic made us—faculty, practitioners, the higher education community—realize that we couldn't keep doing things the way that we had been doing them. We started to see the impacts of dehumanizing expectations for student affairs professionals. We saw the effects of years of burnout turn into the "Great Resignation". We saw the start of declining enrollment in our graduate preparation programs (GPP). But we also saw the opportunities to change. Personally, and professionally, the pandemic was the catalyst for reimagining how I want to live and work.

In this scholarly personal narrative, I embrace my reflective practice to share the lessons I've learned as a faculty member and program director of a GPP. I discuss a work-in-progress model that emerged from visual journaling and highlights how we can center love in the field of higher education—love for ourselves, our students, and our community members.¹

¹My work was funded by the Emerging Scholars Grant Award from ACPA- College Student Educators, International.

Theoretical Framework

The Strategic Imperative for Racial Justice and Decolonization (SIRJD) began in 2016 when various leaders of ACPA-College Student Educators, International (ACPA) met to explore the missions and values of the association, and consider what the future could be. Remarkably, they “departed from that retreat inspired and energized, emboldened by [their] capacity to effect change in a world that has been impacted by ubiquitous change, turmoil, and pain” (Lee, 2016, as cited in Quaye et al., 2019, p. 8). Later, Stephen John Quaye, a former ACPA president, convened a group of scholar practitioners to continue the conversation. Through their own personal reflections, openness, humility, and willingness to dream, SIRJD emerged, providing a possibility model for the field.

Described as “A Bold Vision: The Possibility Framework” (Quaye et al., 2019), SIRJD consists of four parts acknowledging the historical dynamics of society and the field, centering love as the foundation, outlining 11 guiding principles, and resulting in three aspirational outcomes. The framework requires leaders to enhance their self-awareness through reflection and humility. “To see the possibility for enacting racial justice and decolonization requires educators to develop a mindset that is rooted in personal agency, humility, curiosity, intellectual transformation, and the joy of considering what can be” (Quaye et al., 2019, p. 11). It is this mindset that frames my approach to this exploration.

Central to SIRJD is love. The field of student affairs/student services was designed to provide an ethic of care for students in the postsecondary educational spaces (Quaye et al., 2019). Our practice requires compassion and openness to support students in their most vulnerable moments, and to celebrate them in their most glorious achievements. To do that requires us to see their humanity, the fullness of their experiences and emotions. To be concerned with what concerns them. Somewhere along the lines, however, this humanization failed to extend to every student as the demographics, needs, and concerns changed as our student population changed. Moreover, the system—rooted in the dehumanizing ideologies of white supremacy, cishetero capitalist patriarchy—sought to break down educators and practitioners to simply cogs in a machine or a warm body to keep the lights on. “As we envision the processes of racial justice and decolonization, it is clear that love is at the core of all we do” (Quaye et al., 2019, p. 12). Those processes bring freedom, bring life, bring care to all members of the higher education community. “Love is a way of being, ‘it is the sincere wish that another person [has] what they need to be whole and develop themselves to their best capacity for joy or whatever fulfillment they’re seeking’” (Spade, 2006, para. 12, as cited in Quaye et al., 2019, p. 12).

The U.S. higher education system is a product of settler colonialism and slave labor. A site of dehumanization and erasure. And yet, here I am, in the midst of it. To embark upon my own journey with SIRJD, I must acknowledge the realities and commit to disrupting the lingering impacts of the origins of the field. This is a growth opportunity for me as I continue to learn, acknowledge, and disrupt my own (mis)education. It is with that spirit of curiosity that I began this project.

Exploring the Possibilities through Visual Journaling

This idea began during an activity at a session at the 2022 ACPA Annual Convention (Daily, 2022). The presenter guided us through a reflection activity where we could write, draw, color, etc. our thoughts. As we shared our reflections with this group of strangers, I remember feeling a sense of peace, closeness through my own vulnerability, joy, and hope. I was inspired in my creativity and unafraid about what could be, what I wanted my work and life to be, what I wanted my work to mean to others.

From that session, the idea emerged of what would an institution, specifically, or the field of higher education, broadly, look like if we centered love in our practice. Love at the center of our practice, much like SIRJD places love at the center of their framework visualization, is an idea that radically shifts current practice. Higher education institutions continue to be bureaucratic, neoliberal hierarchies (Manning, 2018) that de-humanize faculty and staff, placing them as commodities to serve the ultimate customer, the student. Simultaneously, students are commodified in ways that leverage their backgrounds and experiences to serve the institution to virtue signal diversity through representation or solicit funds from donors, for example. Anything to raise the profile of the institution to generate more revenue for the institution as a response to declines in funding from the state, in the case of public colleges and universities.

However, when we treat all members of the institutional community as “things” and not people, we lose much of what makes higher education institutions unique. Institutions become corporations and not educational environments. Individuals become for-profit entities (motivated by resource acquisition) rather than human beings with a need for connection, protection, and care in order to achieve growth, development, and enlightenment. For this piece, I describe my vision of higher education and the potential impacts for all members of an institutional community. This idea is one facet of a larger work in progress in which I document my experiences as a program director seeking to embed SIRJD into my practice. The larger study will hopefully net findings that speak to how one might operationalize these concepts and actualize this vision. For now, I seek only to describe what could be.

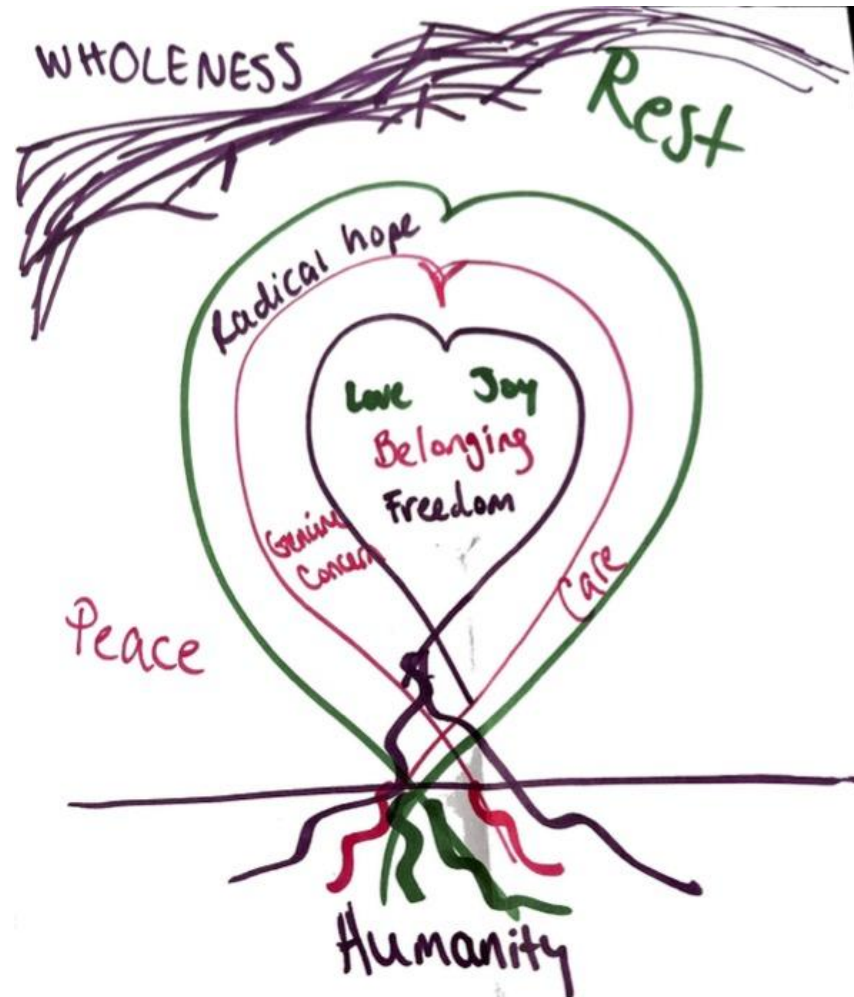


Figure 1. Love at the Center

Starting With Love

As mentioned, love is centralized in this vision. In the college/university setting love should be experienced at every level. For the individual (the innermost heart shape), love/self-love is developed which shows up as joy, sense of belonging, and freedom. Individual members (students, faculty, and staff members) should find joy in their work and academic pursuits. Individuals should find a sense of belonging, not just access—inclusion, not tolerance. From that, freedom to be their full, authentic selves would emerge, creating a full circle moment in which more self-love is produced and love from others is attracted to bring more joy, more belonging, and more freedom.

Self Love

While the idea of self-care has gained traction in popular culture, capitalism has, of course, shown up to either promote spending/consumption/personal gain for vendors or condemn and guilt those who seek it. Caring for one's self is not just vacations and massage appointments. It is rest. It is advocacy. It is disentangling our personal worth and identity from our work when those connections are causing us harm. It is resistance. In the opening of her book, Tricia Hersey (2022) says,

I want this book to be a prayer. A field guide for the rest resistance. A document to be engaged with on the ground as we all navigate the reality of capitalism and white supremacy robbing us of our bodies, our leisure, and our DreamSpace. A blessing whispered over your body and around your head. An embodied pilgrimage toward rest. Let this be a testimony to our collective survival and our present and future thriving. You don't belong on the grind. Get off the violent cycle. It is burning down because we torched it. Grind culture can't have you. (p. 3)

The first step in extending love to others, is loving ourselves. We must humanize ourselves, for ourselves, in order to grow and produce love for others. Like a garden, the seeds of love are buried deep, rooted in humanity, to grow strong for resisting the system that wants to take, but never give (see Figure 1).

Love From the Department

Often, university employees are left out of conversations, or are an afterthought, when it comes to investment through intentional development, achieving goals, or career advancement. Employees are made to feel as though anything they want to do in their job that goes beyond the “duties and responsibilities” is extra and must be initiated by the employee. Supervisors are not always trained to be mentors or coaches or career developers. They are trained to be task managers and overseers of the service to the student. But what if department colleagues and supervisors approached employees with love? Represented in the pink heart (second level) in the sketch is the department level concern and care.

Concern for employee goals, dreams—personal and professional—provides a level of attention and intention that is missing from our traditional bureaucracies. For example, Wilson et al. (2019) discusses inclusive supervision as a way to disrupt current practices in the field. One of the primary tenets is *cultivating holistic development* in which supervisors place equal importance on a staff member's personal development, not just their professional growth. This, along with the other tenets (creating a safe space, demonstrative vulnerability, building capacity in others), shifts the relationship between supervisor and supervisee from a management approach to a relational or leadership approach. Cultivating holistic development requires supervisors to recognize the other aspects of a staff member that go beyond the professional job responsibilities, to see the supervisee as a whole person with interests, hobbies, and roles beyond the job and that also influence how they show up in the

workplace. Attention to this aspect humanizes the staff member, making them eligible for compassion and empathy. Through one's compassion and care, supervisors are poised to attend to staff members needs with accommodations, flexible work schedules, remote work options, and an equitable, fair, livable wage.

The guiding principles of SIRJD highlight the responsibilities we have within this framework. Responsibility over compliance, responsibility as being, and responsibility as action require supervisors to intervene, to act (Quaye et al., 2019). Because we have the capacity to respond, we must challenge policies that are rooted in injustice or cause harm. For example, forcing students to provide new documentation for existing learning differences when not enrolling straight from high school or other policies that put a burden on *some* students financially without exception.

Being in this system allows us to disrupt this system, questioning and problematizing what we see happening around us (Quaye et al., 2019). Academically, this may look like department members providing opportunities and processes for students to report incidents and/or find support when issues arise in the classroom. This would also extend to incidents or issues that arise in business affairs or student affairs departments. Each department member operating with love should regularly ask two questions when engaging students: “What’s underlying this student’s need or concern? How can I resolve, respond to, or remediate this issue to ensure this student feels loved?”

University-Level Love

Often when things go wrong, we want to blame the “university”, but the university is an inanimate object. If we don’t know who to blame, or feel that blame would be useless, we turn our anger or frustration to objects that can’t change anything. Lucky for us, the university is made up of people. Human beings that hold the highest positions of leadership and make decisions that can change the direction or ways of operation for the entire institution. These humans who have experienced individual love, joy, belonging, and freedom, and felt care and concern in their departments, are now positioned to be visionaries for the university. In the third heart, the green external heart, radical hope is the critical activity of the university level. Daring to dream and hope for a university that moves differently—that isn’t concerned with “keeping up with the Joneses”, falling victim to isomorphism and being held hostage by what other universities are doing/offering (Manning, 2018).

To counter centuries of a higher education system that has functioned on the basis of exclusion, radical hope is required. Gannon (2020) describes hope as the counter to despair. Hope “requires us to discern ways of being and acting that are far from clear, and to articulate goals that only exist” on the periphery of our consciousness (p. 4). To me, it is like having a word on the tip of your tongue, so close to consciousness, but just beyond verbalizing. There is a vision for and a reality of our

field that exist just beyond our reach. I hope to one day see it, and operating with love—making love an action word—I can get one step closer.

Love, and Then Some

In this model, I center love at each level—individual, department, and university—because my vision is rooted in our humanity. Each member of the higher education community is a whole person, worthy of love, with their own unique set of experiences, beliefs, dreams, fears, and hopes for their future. The goal of higher education should be to acknowledge each person as an individual and provide an environment in which they can be loved, cared for, and bolstered to chase their dreams and write their story.

I believe that this approach will produce opportunities for rest and a peace unlike anything we have seen in our field. We will no longer take pride in our exhaustion or wear our burnout or busyness as a badge of honor. We will not be evaluated by what we can do for the university—producing scholarship, securing grants, or representing diversity. Our worth will no longer be determined by what we do, but solely by our presence. We will no longer need to be productive to be in the space. We can just exist, like nature, to be beautiful, loveable, and worthy of protection.

Most importantly, with all this together, this approach could result in a collective wholeness that is felt across colleges and universities as well as the field of higher education. SIRJD principles include the necessity of centering compassion and healing, watching out for each other, and developing authentic relationships (Quaye et al., 2019). So much hurt, pain, trauma is tied into our educational histories, sometimes starting as early as kindergarten. Why should higher education, a level of education that is optional for so many, continue this pattern of harm? We must acknowledge the harm, despite the discomfort. That is part of what's required for justice and decolonization work (Quaye et al., 2019). Although we start there, we don't stop there. What if our institutions could be sites for healing, for restoration? Approaching our work from a place of love, would dramatically shift how we do our work and the kinds of work we do for our institutions. And, I believe, we could be made whole—made fully human—in the process.

Further Reflection

As a program director, I am currently asking myself, what would it look like if the SIRJD was centered in my practice? How might that shift or change or impact the way my graduate students are prepared to enter the field? What would that look like for their practice? How might the ways I do my work impact how they build their approach to this work, and what they will bring into the field? How would that impact the institutions where they work, and the students they work with, to then start a snowball effect in which higher education institutions and the field become places centered in love? This model that I have sketched has expanded my own thinking and pushed me in a couple different directions with my own reflections.

Over the last year, I have worked to release the pressure valve I placed on myself for many years. Acknowledging when I did not have the capacity for another committee or project and daring to say no. I have worked to offer myself grace in the same ways I have offered grace to students and colleagues. Often there are times when I wish someone would give me permission to opt out of tasks when things start to feel overwhelming. So, I routinely give that to others. I want folks to feel comfortable prioritizing themselves despite the continuous requests for us to do more. SIRJD gives me permission, in a way, to emphasize my own agency and to respect the agency of those I work with and serve (Quaye et al., 2019). I validate those who are brave enough to be vulnerable in a system that exploits signs of weakness. I silently cheer when folks change careers because they dared to prioritize their health and well-being. It is hard, it is constant, it is a daily push to fight against an engrained way of operating. But I know I am worth the fight.

Through visual journaling, I can tangibly see love at the center of myself and my work. By embracing new methods as a scholar, I am giving myself the opportunity to sit and think and dream and create rather than rush through what is “easy” or “expedient” in terms of publications. I want my work to have meaning, not just for me, but for the field that I love. Reflection, journaling, and visual methods allow me the time and space to just be. To be a human *being*, not just a human *doing*, and that is a gift. Loving myself enough to just be, is a tiny step toward making my vision for higher education a reality.

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