

Confessions of a Student Affairs Blogger: Learning to Fly

StudentAffairs.com Blogger

(The author wishes to remain anonymous so she can continue blogging for the website)

For the past year and a half, I have shared the ups and downs of my career on an anonymous blog on StudentAffairs.com. And while I hope that my readers enjoyed watching me survive the job search and make the transition from graduate student to new professional, the person who got the most out of this blog was definitely me. But let's start from the beginning.

I was in my second year of graduate school, when the opportunity was presented to me to write a blog about my job search. I've always loved writing (after all, I attempted to write my first novel in elementary school; I now have a B.A. in Journalism and one of my heroes is J.K. Rowling). To be honest, I didn't think much about it...it sounded like fun, so why not do it. Every few days, I would sit down and write about my job search experiences. I recounted my progress in putting together my resume and cover letter, talked about my first contacts with institutions, discussed the experience of interviewing at a national conference, and shared many anxious days and nights of waiting to hear from institutions with my readers.

If you've ever kept a diary, you will know the freeing feeling of writing down what is bothering you or what you are concerned about. Just writing it down helps you to clear your head and put your worries and troubles behind you. The blog became a tool for me to do just that. When the stressfulness of the job search was getting to me, I sat down at my computer and just wrote and wrote and wrote until I felt better. When my head was so full that I couldn't grasp one specific thought, I – almost like Dumbledore using his Pensieve in Harry Potter – used the blog to sort through my thoughts. Looking back at those entries a few days later, I was able to see different threads in my thoughts, prioritize what my main concerns at the moment should be and figure out a way to tackle the next hurdle in the job search.

As I started sharing my successes and failures freely on my blog, several of my friends, who knew that I was posting to this blog and who followed my entries, asked me how I could be so open and candid on such a public forum as a Web site. To be honest, most of the time, when I was writing, I forgot that people were actually reading this. I was writing for myself, not for the anonymous readership out there. And yes, once in a while the thought crossed my mind that one of my supervisors may be reading the blog and may be able to figure out that it was me, but I pushed those thoughts aside quickly. If you know me, it would probably be pretty easy to discover my secret. While I never mentioned my institution's name or even any of my colleagues or student's names, the position I currently hold has some very unique aspects (I work in Residence Life but am also the academic adviser for the first year students in my building) and besides, I have often mentioned projects I was working on or events that had recently occurred on my campus. But whenever I started worrying about it, I told myself that even if

someone guessed that the blogger was me, they would not be able to hold me accountable for what I wrote or question my thoughts as they would not know for sure. Besides, I wasn't making up stories or writing anything to hurt people's feelings; I was discussing how I felt and what I thought. And if it came down to it, I would be comfortable standing up for anything that I had written in my blog – even though I am not going to pretend that the anonymity of the blog hasn't allowed me to be a lot more candid and open than I would otherwise feel comfortable being. And, as I said earlier, when I sit down at my computer and start rambling about the events of the day, I just forget that others actually read this.

When I did remember my readers, I often wondered what they were thinking about the blog. It was hard to believe that anyone would actually care about my ramblings. Did it even make sense to them? So often, I was just writing what was in my head – with no rhyme or reason, no outline or planned storyline. I often felt like I was doing one of those brainstorming exercises, letting my thoughts wonder freely and jump from one topic to another. Did that really make for good reading material or was I confusing my audience? I highly doubted I would ever read something like that, so whenever I found out the statistics about how many people regularly went to the page, I was shocked. I told myself that maybe my ramblings, as disorganized and confusing as they were, did give them an insight into my feelings and experiences and hopefully they were able to relate to some of it. Nevertheless, I still had a hard time believing that people were actually reading the blog. So I'm sure you can imagine my excitement whenever a reader would leave a comment. My readers were this "thing" out there – impossible to grasp for me, something very surreal. It was easy for me to think, "Oh, nobody's really reading this." But when someone left a comment, the readers suddenly became real to me.

The comments did more for me than just make my readers real. The supportiveness and concern of my readers helped me through the job search.

There was a time in my job search, when an institution that I was really excited about, had offered me an on-campus interview but then realized that they could not hire me because of my immigration status (I am an Austrian citizen and at that time was still on an international student visa). I was upset – no, the word "upset" doesn't even cover it – I was devastated. I told my readers in the entry discussing that situation that, "Sometimes I feel like my life is a graveyard of broken dreams" (March 30, 2006). Yes, I can be a drama queen sometimes. But I had just been so excited about this institution – the job included many aspects I knew I would greatly enjoy and it was in the perfect location – and it just didn't seem fair that something like my immigration status was stopping me from working there.

All day, I was feeling down. That night, I sat down and just wrote – pouring my frustration and sadness into my post. A few days later, I checked the blog and five readers had left comments, expressing their empathy for my situation and encouraging me not to lose hope. And while my friends had been doing all in their power to cheer me up and had told me many of the same things these strangers noted in their comments, it was those people I had never met and

whose names I didn't even know, who finally got through to me and pulled me out of my desperation.

I can't really explain it myself. It was just the fact that someone out there, who wasn't a friend or family member, believed in me. They didn't have to say those things; it wasn't like my friends and family members, who, of course, were supportive and empathetic because that's what family and friends do. These people, who didn't even know my name, were rooting for me. One of the readers commented, "It sounds to me that you're going to be an excellent candidate... You're in my thoughts a lot!" It was an incredible feeling to read such statements about me from total strangers!

Being an international student going through the job search, I often felt alone. Yes, my friends and colleagues from graduate school were experiencing the same anxieties about interviews and those nerve-racking times of waiting to hear from an institution, but they didn't have to deal with the additional worries about my immigration status. I didn't just worry that I wouldn't get a job; I worried about having to leave the country – a country that I had called home for six years – and move back to Austria where Student Affairs doesn't even exist. Even when I received good news on the job search front, I couldn't fully enjoy them as I continued to worry about my immigration status. In my blog entry on March 27, 2006, I discussed such a situation: "Then, I got another on-campus interview. For a couple minutes, I was in seventh heaven. Then, panic set in again because now I had to tell them that I'm an international student."

My mentors and colleagues were very supportive – trying to help me find solutions, trying to calm my nerves, ensuring me that things would be fine. But they didn't understand. Hardly anyone had any idea of what the immigration laws are really like. Their well-intentioned tips and confident comments didn't do anything to lessen my anxiety. But once again, having this blog came in helpful. After I had discussed some of my worries, other international students started commenting. I set up an anonymous e-mail address, which allowed my readers to contact me without me putting my anonymity in jeopardy. Via that e-mail, I was able to contact some of the international students, who had commented on my blog. They had been through the job search and visa application process and I wanted to hear more about their stories. I asked these readers when to disclose my immigration status to employers and how to go about it. I was able to find out how they had made it through this scary process and what, looking back now, they would do differently. Their advice was incredibly helpful but most of all, knowing that someone else in a similar situation had made it through this process successfully and had landed a good job gave me hope and confidence.

When I continued writing my blog during my first year as a new professional, I tried to take on the role of the mentor for international students, who may be reading my blog. I touched base with one, who had contacted me – again via comments – asking some questions about my job search experience. Being able to help someone, now that I had survived this awful process, was extremely rewarding. After all, I had experienced how helpful having a person to talk to could be just the previous year.

Several aspects of the purpose of the blog, at least for myself, changed my second year, when I was working as a new professional in my first post-graduate school position. I still utilized the blog as a place to vent and to get my thoughts out there. But now, it also became a tool to reflect on my growth and development as a professional.

It all started after I accepted a job offer. Suddenly, there was no more job craziness in my life and I had a chance to sit down, take a deep breath and start reflecting on my job search experiences. As I was looking back at those tumultuous months, I developed a list of tips for others, who may be going through the job search, as well as a list to keep in mind for myself when I attempt my next job search (which will hopefully be less of an emotional rollercoaster).

I continued to examine my experiences of that last semester as a graduate student and decided to set some goals for my summer before starting my first job as a full-time professional. I soon realized that having these goals written down gave me a much better incentive and drive to accomplish them, than if I had just thought of those goals in my head. It was as if writing them down made them real. Or as if I had entered into a contract with my readers. I didn't want to have to go back and admit to my readers that I hadn't accomplished those goals. And when I did have to make such a confession – for example in my post on June 7, 2006, I admitted that, "I haven't been very successful at achieving my goals for the summer. I was doing really well in the beginning and then I just kind of fell off the wagon" – this confession helped me get back on track again.

My goals, that summer, focused mainly on having a better balance in my life, finding some new hobbies and being healthy. As the academic year started in my first year as a full-time professional staff member, I utilized this tool again, this time for job-related goals. Throughout the year, I kept going back to those goals to see to evaluate how I was doing. In our profession, it's easy to get caught up in the day-to-day needs of your job and to forget the bigger pictures. Having these written-down goals and being able to look back at previous posts, I was able to keep the big picture in mind. And at the end of the year, I spent quite some time looking over old posts and reflecting on my learning and professional development of that first year as a professional.

The blog also gave me an opportunity to discuss some of the bigger issues in Student Affairs that I was thinking about. For example, my entry on September 5, 2007, talked about being a woman in Student Affairs. I shared with my readers my concerns about wanting to have a family but also have a career. "A man can have a career and a family. But can a woman do that?" I questioned. While such thoughts have often crossed my mind before I started posting on this blog, it's been helpful to write them down and really take the time to examine my feelings regarding the issues.

We talk so much about being reflective practitioners in our field. After graduating, I had all these plans about keeping a journal and making sure that I would regularly reflect on my practices. But soon I got caught up with work. Reflection time was postponed. After all, nobody would realize that I hadn't spent some time reflecting on my experience that week, but if that report was handed in to my supervisor late, I would for sure hear about it. If I hadn't had the blog this year, I

probably would have never really sat down and examined my style, my practices and my learning. But looking back was very beneficial as I was preparing for the upcoming year, my second year as a new professional (time really flies!). My memory can be quite selective; I tend to block out unpleasant memories and have become so good at it that I seriously won't remember the bad things that happened. I look back at past years and think that everything was perfect then. But when I reread my blog, I was reminded of some of the struggles I had with my staff or colleagues or supervisors. This information came in useful when I tried to figure out my approach to various issues for the upcoming year, attempting to find ways to avoid being faced with the same challenges again. And sometimes, it's just a nice reality check that helps me realize that there have always been ups and downs, but that in the end, it all somehow worked out.

I have now contributed to this blog for a year and a half and I can hardly imagine my life without it. It's become one of the few consistent aspects of my life – a valued “friend,” listener and tool for reflection; a way to keep me sane as I go through the ups and downs of my career and of living so far away from my family and friends. While I sometimes have to force myself to put time aside to update my blog, I am glad that I'm forced to take this time to reflect and I greatly enjoy having this outlet. I'm really looking forward to another year with my blog and my readers.