

Bubble Wrap Your Career: Six Sustaining Factors to Build Resiliency

Kate Steiner, Ph.D. | Radford University | @drkatesteiner

You wouldn't just throw your fragile items in a moving box and hope for the best. So why would you jump into a job without considering how to protect yourself as you transition through your career? Often when considering the attrition rate in student affairs, research studies it from the perspective of "why people leave." By shifting the focus and asking "how people stay," I have been able to isolate 6 factors that support professionals in their career as a fraternity/sorority advisor (FSA). Addressing each factor can build resiliency to the burnout that naturally occurs as part of the job. Addressing these factors and using self-reflection can essentially bubble wrap your career.

Through semi-structured interviews with professionals who had maintained a career in fraternity/sorority advising for a minimum of 5 years, the following sustaining factors were determined to be consistent themes among all of the participants; Recognizing Burnout, Maintaining Wellness, Making an Impact, Importance of Relationships, Having Outside Interests, and Being Passionate about the Role. These 6 factors support each other and provide a foundation for professionals to build resiliency.

Recognizing Burnout

Burnout occurs on a spectrum and can fall anywhere between feeling emotionally drained following a big event to a daily struggle because you feel the work has become a burden and you no longer find joy in the job. An important sustaining factor is being able to recognize burn events before you become completely crispy and fried. There are two types of burn events; expected and unexpected. Expected Burn Events are a known activity or situation that lead a person to feel emotionally drained, exhausted, and temporarily overwhelmed by the current circumstances (i.e. Panhellenic Recruitment, Homecoming week, Conventions, or the month of April). Unexpected Burn Events are activities or situations that cause emotional exhaustion, fatigue, feel unmanageable or defeating, and occur without warning (i.e. death of a student, report of hazing or sexual misconduct allegations, or suddenly becoming short staffed).

In order to recognize your own spectrum of burnout and burn events, you will need to do a little soul searching. This self-reflection process can be internal, external, or both. Internal reflection can be done through reflective writing, expressive arts, or thought mapping. External reflection may include seeking feedback, working with a professional counselor, or conducting a process discussion. The important piece to this factor is to understand and recognize your own

triggers to burnout and burn events. Knowing this information will inform you on how prepare and recover from those events. If you find yourself still acting hangry towards others, even though you just ate, you may want to figure out what else is going on.

Pursuing Wellness

Striving for wellness is not an endgame; it is a journey. It changes as you and your life changes. In general, wellness is made up of several components that help professionals feel more balance and in control of their world. These elements are physical wellness, social interactions, spiritual connection, mental/emotional wellness, and an absence of negative stress. Physical wellness includes exercise and diet, but it also includes the enjoyment of food or beverages.

Social interactions are an important aspect for wellness, because human beings are social by nature. When we are having a hard day, we feel better when we have a supportive person who will just listen to our story. Having a spiritual connection could be defined as an overall sense of purpose as a human or a connection to something that is bigger than yourself. This could be reflected by a connection to nature, practiced through meditation, exercise, or by attending religious services. Mental and emotional wellness is honoring all feelings both negative and positive and finding a safe space to express those emotions.

Most of the participants in the study reported they discovered their own personal definition for wellness following experiences with burnout. While stress can have a positive impact in regard to motivation (raise your hand if you are deadline orientated), ongoing stress will negatively affect a person's wellness. Hence, when it is absent people feel more well.

Making an Impact

Professionals are able to sustain their career when they believe they are making an impact with the community they are working with. Recognition of this impact came from individual connections with students and colleagues; receiving a heartfelt thank you note from a former challenging student; or being recognized formally for their work through by receiving a reward. Observing long range community change was a second way professionals knew their work was important.

Importance of Relationships

Relationships have a huge impact on our ability to sustain in a situation. Positive, supportive relationships strengthen our connection to our institution and role. In the same regard, challenging relationships can weaken our resolve and make the work start to feel like a burden.

Those who are able to sustain their career find positive relationships to balance out those that are harmful. If you struggle in your interactions with a supervisor or colleague, seek out an additional mentor in the field who can provide a counterbalance of support and empathy.

Developing Outside Interests

This factor is incredibly important and often the first thing professionals let slide as they become busier in their work. Successful professionals have learned how to set boundaries to leave their work at work and maintain social connections or passion pursuits that are not connected to their campus, job, or the field of fraternity/sorority advising. This will look different for each person, and will change as your life transitions and changes. For me, the biggest lesson learned through this research was to make sure I maintain social relationships with people who did not work on my campus. You are not taking a break from your work if you only socialize with people you work with and you continue to talk about work during that down time.

Maintaining Passion for the Role

Professionals who had sustained their career as an FSA described a calling for the work. Nearly every participant used a statement similar to “if not me, then who?” during their interview. This passion for the work is the place we come back to when we find ourselves questioning why we are still working in this field. However, this factor cannot sustain a career on its own, it plays a supportive role to the other 5 factors.

We need strong professionals in this field and part of that strength comes from continued experience. Sustaining a career takes work, self-reflection, and intentionality. These 6 factors create a supportive foundation to help you observe, prepare, and recover from burn events. Each recovery you make, the more resilience you build as a professional and the thicker your bubble wrap becomes.

Dr. Kate Steiner

Dr. Kate Steiner is the Director of Fraternity and Sorority Life at Radford University. Before recently relocating to southwest Virginia, she was living in Wyoming finishing her Ph.D. in Counselor Education and Supervision at the University of Wyoming. She has been working in the field of fraternity/sorority advising since 2005. She also holds a Masters of Counseling degree in Student Affairs and College Counseling from Idaho State University and completed her undergraduate degree at the University of Wyoming. She has a long standing passion in

addressing professional burnout and increased longevity in the FSA field. Things that are important to her own wellness include aerial yoga, good food, time on a beach, and traveling with friends.

References

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