# From "Grand Principles" to "Lived Stories": An Autoethnography of Narrative Transformation Among University Student Affairs Workers

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Abstract: Based on the consideration that educational narratives by student affairs workers in higher education institutions can be an effective pathway for their professional growth, this study focuses on the practical application of educational narratives by these workers. Using autoethnographic analysis to return to real-life contexts, it summarizes and outlines the characteristics of their educational narratives. The research traces the transformation of these narratives—from the professional journey of "explaining principles", "demonstrating rationale", and "debating their merits" to the workplace "epiphanies" of "narrating stories about 'being a person'", "narrating stories about 'being a teacher'", and "narrating stories about 'handling matters'". Through this analysis, the study provides insights into the professional development of student affairs workers and offers a case study on how they can maintain the appropriate intensity and rhythm of educational narratives in the digital-intelligent era.

Keywords: Student affairs workers in higher education, Educational narrative, Autoethnography.

### 1. Introduction

As one of the effective pathways for the professional development of student affairs workers in higher education [1], educational narrative provides a reference for their daily work. However, following the proliferation of narrative discourse and the ensuing "crisis of narrative" [2], the increasing "mutual accusations" between college students and student affairs workers on social media platforms reveal that, amid the clamor of storytelling, a narrative vacuum still persists.

In contrast to the numerous complaints from students about student affairs workers, the latter's grievances against students have also surged, shifting from physical spaces like classrooms and offices to the mobile internet. This long-distance "clashing" and "venting" reflects a subtle antagonism between contemporary student affairs workers and college students. While they still maintain "decent" interactions on campus and in classrooms, avoiding direct confrontation, the anonymity of cyberspace grants both sides the "convenience" to air their grievances unreservedly.

What has severed their dialogue, turning the narratives of student affairs workers into an unbearable "tight curse" for students? And why have students become the "hard nuts to crack" —those who "remain unmoved by reason or emotion" —in the eyes of student affairs workers? Is educational narrative truly an effective growth pathway for them? If it has been fruitful, how has it become either "inseparable" from or "increasingly distant" from their daily work? If it has proven ineffective, where should we turn to forge a new path—one that enhances mutual empathy, reestablishes connection, and transforms "clashing views" into "meeting of minds"? Only then can student affairs workers truly refine themselves, through their interactions with students, into life mentors for their growth and trusted friends for their well-being.

2. Research Content and Methodology

affairs Existing studies on student professionals enhancing ideological predominantly concentrate on awareness and reinforcing job responsibilities to improve work efficiency. However, they rarely expose or address the actual "problems" encountered in daily practice. This conspicuous absence raises critical questions: Does it indicate an actual absence of issues, thus rendering disclosure unnecessary? Or does it reflect a culture of silence where concerns yields no meaningful response? voicing Furthermore, are the successful experiences of student affairs workers' educational narratives shared openly and unreservedly? Are the lessons learned from their narrative failures discussed with equal candor?

For the past seven years, I have been immersed in student affairs work, personally undergoing the transformation from a "novice" to a "expert". This journey has crystallized certain occupational stereotypes-while cautiously maintaining the dual professional identity of "life mentor" and "confidant", the self-deprecating "nanny" persona often emerges after frustrating work experiences. This self-caricature serves as a raw yet powerless "annotation" of daily practice, inadvertently obscuring deeper professional dilemmas: the unspeakable constraints, ineffective efforts, and compulsory rhetoric that plague the profession. Such masking not only deprives work of its authenticity but also reduces teacher-student interactions to mere formalities. Only by entering their world-through systematic observation, attentive listening, empathetic understanding, and meticulous documentation of their words and deeds-can student affairs workers truly return to the authentic scene of educational narratives. This approach helps pierce through the occupational facade of "reporting successes while concealing problems", resolve the communication impasse between student affairs workers and their students, rekindle their emotional connection and mutual understanding, and ultimately inform more effective educational narrative practices.

This study focuses on "educational narratives of student affairs workers" as its central theme, aiming to conduct a

comprehensive scan of their narrative practices in educational contexts, compare and analyze the evolution of such narratives throughout their careers and systematically summarize the defining characteristics and significance of these narratives. Given this research scope, determining how to access the field of student affairs workers' educational narratives-and understand what actually transpires between them and students through these narratives-has emerged as a key methodological challenge. Drawing on autoethnography, which treats personal cognition as "primary experiential source material" (Anderson & Austin, 2012) [3], this study leverages my seven-year immersion in student affairs work. This extended engagement has yielded rich professional experiences, documenting a personal journey from idealistic enthusiasm to disillusionment, and from confident strides to hesitant pauses. Through an autoethnographic lens, the study analyzes interactions with over 800 students to trace how educational narratives have shifted from grand and abstract principles to personalized and relatable stories.

### 3. "Grand Principles" as Vocational Calling

The sociologist Weber, in his lecture Science as a Vocation, defined academic work and its relationship to faith and professional ethics (Qu Jingdong, 2018). Although I have only been a student affairs worker for seven years, the term "grand principles" seems to have permeated my professional beliefs and career throughout. From planting the seed of ambition during my university years in 2009, to resisting my professors and family to pursue cross-disciplinary graduate studies in 2013, to facing setbacks in job hunting and being forced to compromise in 2017, I finally embarked on student affairs work in June 2018. I constantly ask myself: how exactly did these "grand principles" become infused into my work? What emerges is that "expounding principles", "demonstrating their validity" and "debating their merits" have collectively sketched my professional portrait at different stages.

## 3.1 The Professional Imagination of "Explaining Principles"

In 2010, during my sophomore year, I was elected by my classmates as a "model student" through a competitive election. This recognition from both teachers and peers filled me with immense satisfaction. My homeroom teacher, the embodiment of "positive energy", illuminated my university journey. She administered career assessment tests for our entire class and incorporated safety education into our weekly meetings—practices that introduced me to entirely new academic experiences.

From the very beginning of my studies, I aspired to become someone like her: a person who reasoned with others, communicated diligently, and showed genuine care. Yet, during those ambitious but often restrictive undergraduate years, my engineering background seemed to "strangle" my dream of becoming a student affairs professional. But dreams have relentless power. By my junior year, I resolved to undertake a covert mission: preparing for the postgraduate entrance exam—in education, a field entirely unrelated to my major. Why abandon your original career prospects? Are you truly prepared for this shift? Such well-intentioned questions relentlessly probed at my motivations: Why was I so determined to establish myself in academia, willingly dedicating myself to student affairs work? Because this profession had nourished my life. My teacher had used principled guidance to impart critical life lessons at pivotal moments—lessons that convinced me: "Reasoning" should not merely be an ideal across professions, but a lifelong conviction for student affairs workers. Through reasoned discourse, knowledge, experience, skills, and wisdom are transmitted top-down, unlocking new possibilities for growth. It allows students, under their teachers' guidance, to avoid unnecessary detours and achieve the ultimate aims of education.

Inspired by this philosophy, my vision for the work grew increasingly concrete: beyond being a job requiring face-to-face interaction, it demanded exceptional communicative competence — a dynamic exchange of speaking and listening. Through this role, I hoped to share my life experiences, both good and bad, encouraging others to develop critical reflection through my stories. In these dialogues, I sought to deepen our collective understanding of life's meaning.

#### 3.2 "Principled Choice" in Vocational Pursuit

Guided by these professional aspirations, I realized that an undergraduate degree alone would not secure my goal of working in higher education—thus the decision to pursue a master's degree took root. Just as those who believe the gaokao (national college entrance exam) can transform one's destiny, I clung to the conviction that postgraduate studies could similarly rejuvenate my future.

Selecting a university and program became a pivotal crossroads. I repeatedly sought advice from professors and family, laying bare my "naïve assumptions"-by which I meant my vague yet fervent desire to "become a university instructor" without clarity on the institutional type (elite or ordinary; undergraduate or vocational colleges) and the role (student affairs workers or discipline-specific faculty). This half-formed vision led to pragmatic compromises: I deliberately avoided programs requiring advanced mathematics due to my academic limitations. When I finally settled on applying for a prestigious university's Master of Education, it felt like emerging from darkness into light.

Yet the two-year struggle to gain admission—followed by post-graduation job rejections—forced me to question whether my idealistic pledge to "become someone who reasons with others" had been misguided. During a year of "frantic career-hopping", I took roles utterly unrelated to student affairs: lead instructor at a test-prep agency, café manager, hotel restaurant server, etc. These detours, however, became unexpected laboratories for redefining what "principled guidance" truly meant. By 2018, resolved to no longer be a "knockdown pushover", I restarted my job search in earnest—ultimately ranking first in group interviews to secure my current position.

The irony wasn't lost on me: someone who'd never topped

any academic competition now achieved this milestone while approaching the age of starting a family. This career, arriving like "a child born to elderly parents", brought both belated joy and the satisfaction of closing a decade-long loop. When others praised my path as "logical and inevitable", I reminded myself of its "hard-won" nature—and that becoming students' "life mentor and confidant" would demand perpetual growth.

#### 3.3 "Negotiating Principles" in Professional Adaptation

In those early days of my career, life brimmed with passion-fueled purpose. My social media became a chronicle of daily workplace minutiae, each post radiating satisfied exhaustion. I meticulously envisioned every possible scenario for my September debut with students, determined to make an impeccable first impression. Fate accelerated the timeline. Merely a week after completing onboarding, I received notice to assume duties immediately—my formal initiation commencing with coaching students for a provincial-level opening ceremony performance. Unbeknownst to me, this premature assignment would thrust both my students and me into a crucible of institutional demands and sweltering summer hardships.

Early in my career, lacking experience, I cautiously kept my conversations with students "limited to everyday topics" [4]. I sought advice from senior colleagues on interacting with college students, and "empathic ability" was repeatedly emphasized as an essential quality to cultivate. When faced with students arriving late, leaving early, or acting emotionally during rehearsal-especially after hearing their complaints that "the director's tone is so heartless and disrespectful"-I made my first attempt to "debate" with the relevant students from the perspective of "lofty principles". Through "earnest and well-intentioned persuasion" regarding ideological awareness and broad-mindedness, I tried to convince these "young people" to understand the difficulties the director faced in organizing rehearsals for a thousand-person event, hoping they would persevere and successfully complete the task.

Fooled by the silence that followed, I mistook it as vindication of my "moral reasoning"-elevating grand principles to sacred doctrine as I welcomed my first cohort with inflated confidence. That inaugural year unfolded in a frenzy of manic dedication: crafting growth-oriented benchmarks, parading model students as exemplars, co-designing carrot-and-stick systems with the class. I "resolved" psychological crises case by case, lectured on exam misconduct repercussions, orchestrated parent-school rescue plans, and policed compliance with every conceivable regulation-all while preaching the gospel of "self-actualized" college life. Their initial compliance bred dangerous illusions. I committed to curating a lifelong professional persona as the "Principled Counselor", blissfully oblivious to the impending cracks in this rhetorical edifice-unprepared for when, where, or how the "reasoning" would fail.

## 4. The Emergence of "Minor Incidents" and the Entrance of "Lived Stories"

Despite my efforts to refine the delivery, examples, and

frequency of my "grand principles" educational narratives striving to resonate more deeply with students and avoid futile preaching — the extended tenure of my work and the evolving life experiences of my students eventually led to moments when "reasoning" simply stopped working. These were the critical junctures where narrative "accidents" occurred, exposing the aphasia of student affairs workers' educational storytelling when fractures appeared in teacher-student relationships.

The contemporary German thinker Byung-Chul Han, in The Crisis of Narrative, invokes Walter Benjamin's observation: "What people really want to hear is no longer reports from afar, but information that helps them interpret what is near at hand [5]." This underscores, in an age of information overload, the necessity for storytellers to "draw from their own lived experience or the accounts of others, transforming these into the listener's own experience [6]." Looking back at the "professional footage" of my seven-year career, I see how the emergence of these educational narrative "minor incidents" became intertwined with the entrance of "lived stories". Together, they directed the winding trajectory of my narrative practice.

#### 4.1 The Occurrence of "Minor Incidents"

#### 4.1.1 Incident-Driven: Frequent or Occasional?

In any school, communication between teachers and students is never entirely a smooth and effortless process. Students engaging in educational activities within the confines of school rules, teacher authority, and their own sense of student identity are bound to be influenced by these factors. Communication and interaction between students and teachers cannot avoid topics like academics and career development. Before entering society, young university students are often placed under high expectations on campus, as they need to undergo a perfect transformation from "student" to "adult," aligning with the societal expectations of life after reaching adulthood.

In addition to completing academic tasks, learning "how to be a person" and "how to do things" is both a parent's earnest wish when sending their child to university and a thoughtful reminder from higher education student workers when welcoming new students. When the life scene shifts from the familiar home to the unfamiliar college campus, the first major hurdle university students face in adapting to university life is interpersonal communication.

Seven years ago, when I received a phone call from a freshman's parent asking, "My child bought the wrong soap dish at the supermarket. Can the teacher help her out so she won't feel upset?" the researcher was stunned. Was the student's lack of basic life knowledge going to make her new university life full of various challenges? Why couldn't she just contact the store to exchange the item, or approach a teacher to explain the difficulty, instead of reinforcing her helplessness by involving her parent as an intermediary? When students' behavior doesn't align with the expectations the researcher has for them, I too may find themselves in a professional dilemma, unable to express their confusion and frustration.

For me, being "silent" in front of the student could be because the student asked a "non-issue" during the weekend, or because the student didn't follow school rules for leave procedures, and the researcher was "wrongfully reported" by another teacher. In this case, I may have "finally" lost patience, becoming unwilling to "reason" any further and feeling a sense of helplessness: "Who understands?" The first kind of "silence" is a mute cry of "Why doesn't he understand the basic norms of interpersonal communication?" The second kind is the conflict and hesitation of "Why won't he listen, even after being told?" In either case, the "reason" disappears from the teacher-student interaction. Whether this situation occurs for the first time in a particular cohort or repeatedly appears across different cohorts of students, communication breaks down when the higher education student worker becomes "frustrated." Students, in turn, feel confused because the truth is hidden from them, and when they don't receive an effective response, they might post the conversation records online to let "everyone" "judge" the situation.

#### 4.1.2 Case-Specific: "Defusing" or "Escalating"?

When such "minor incidents" occur, whether they are treated as "making a big deal out of a small issue" or "making a small issue a big deal" depends entirely on the time, space, and the relationship foundation between the student affairs worker and the students involved. If the incident occurs during the student affairs worker's office hours and within the office space, "face-to-face" communication should allow for meaningful conversation, with neither party being at a loss for words, topics, or reasons to discuss. On the contrary, it is the concern of not being able to connect with the teacher that drives more and more students to retreat into the online space, where they are free from time and space limitations, sending their life thoughts and doubts to the teacher on the other side of the network in real-time.

However, greetings like "Are you there?" on social platforms and off-hours exchanges often make the "24-hour on-call" higher education student affairs worker become "alert." If the relationship is close, the two individuals may engage in "effective communication," where there is always a response. But if there is no prior relationship, "half-hearted" conversations are likely to be ineffective. I once suggested that, to make work more convenient, students should directly call me in case of urgent matters, and for non-urgent issues, they should communicate face-to-face during working hours, thus minimizing the negative impact of "non-issues."

However, in my seven years of professional career, countless "non-issues" have arisen. "What should I do if I missed an elective class?" "Should I participate in this event?" "Do you think I should take the postgraduate exam?" "Can you tell me where the campus health center is?"... Students are well-versed in "distant" social news but know very little about their "immediate" school environment. When faced with repeated questions of this nature, I follow the routine by selecting a few active and trusted students from the class, who are recommended by their peers, to act as a "bridge" for communication between the teacher and the other students. This "green channel" aims to reduce the frequency of communication difficulties through "mentoring."

Although the intention behind this strategy is good, it can also bring new problems. The class committee members, who frequently communicate with the higher education student affairs worker, may enjoy the "convenience" and the reputation of being the teacher's "favorite," but they also carry the unwanted "reputation," which could lead to estrangement within their peer groups, creating more potential interpersonal issues. A small communication issue could thus evolve into a major conflict between teachers and students. It is important to clarify, with a sense of lightness, that the "serious" situation is neither a permanent dynamic between teachers and students nor does it suggest my personal "small issue being blown out of proportion." It only appears sporadically between higher education student affairs workers and college students, and all student affairs workers in higher education will inevitably encounter this at some point in their careers.

#### 4.1.3 Law-Induced Dilemma: Educating or Misleading?

While this study documents instances of "silent conflicts" between student affairs workers and undergraduates, its purpose is not to discredit the profession. Harmonious teacher-student relationships fall outside this investigation's scope—targeting "typical pain points" remains our most viable path to diagnosing systemic issues.

During my seventh year, an incidental conversation between two students in a convenience store laid bare the core tension: "Serves him right for remaining a lecturer instead of making associate professor. He only noticed our assignment formatting was wrong near the deadline—why should our exam prep suffer for his oversight?" When asked "What type of faculty do you prefer engaging with?", students consistently described ideal educators as those who respect students' autonomy, demolish hierarchical barriers and exhibit authentic (unpretentious) demeanor. Conversely, asked "Which student type feels most manageable?", student affairs workers admitted preferential treatment toward those perceived as compliant and obedient, while consciously avoiding "difficult communicators".

Yet reality seldom delivers perfect teacher-student alignment in learning philosophies, work ethics and personal temperaments. Every student affairs worker encounters students who render them speechless; every student confronts incomprehensible instructors. The grievance "I can't stand hearing him talk" severs communicative pathways, reducing interactions to performative futility. Once such ruptures occur, neither party maintains objectivity. Evaluations metastasize into life-curse level condemnations (e.g., teachers sniping "Your civil service exam failure proves your foundational incompetence") or existential verdicts (students dismissing instructors' career stagnation as karmic justice).

Do all such clashes erupt into full conflict? When uncontrollable confrontations arise, our mutual assessments become both targeted attacks and indiscriminate bombardments. Yet after these principle-free battles, we invariably "shake hands and make up"—fulfilling our institutional roles. While time eventually dissolves most animosities alongside their triggering conflicts, the pressing question remains: What proactive interventions can we deploy before temporal attrition becomes our sole mediator?

#### 4.2 The Occurrence of "Lived Stories"

#### 4.2.1 Narrating Stories about "Being a Person"

The moment my senior colleague's advice about "empathy" truly crystallized for me occurred around a national holiday. A student came to my office to request leave—her first time doing so—and spoke so nervously her voice barely rose above a whisper. Recognizing how crucial this trip was for her, I patiently reassured her, adding, "Please message me when you arrive home and return to campus safely." She left my office in tears, while I sat quietly reflecting: When did I, the once "iron-hearted" rule-enforcer obsessed with principles above all, become soft enough to think: "I was 18 once too—why did it take me so long to truly connect with them?" Her crying mirrored my own freshman-year grief when learning of my grandfather's passing. Such moments of vulnerability transcend roles, binding us through shared humanity.

Early in my career, simply interacting with undergraduates felt exhilarating. While dutifully executing my job's nine core responsibilities, I gradually reconstructed my professional philosophy. That "I-know-best" mentality once convinced me students should heed my advice unquestioningly-even as I curated weekly classic book recommendations and distributed annual "life motto" keycards at grade-wide assemblies. Yet I ignored the dismal download rates, unopened pages, and near-zero internalization of these "treasured wisdoms". Only by seeing students as full humans-no better or worse than myself-could my stories of "being human" become audible. This shift shatters generational biases ("kids these days") and honors developmental realities by normalizing "immaturity" as growth-in-process, permitting trial-and-error learning and allowing organic transitions from naivety to wisdom. True educational storytelling flows not from indoctrination, but from soul-to-soul linkages-the kind that transforms pedagogy into atmospheric nourishment.

4.2.2 Narrating Stories about "Being a Teacher"

For higher education student affairs workers, the dual identity of being both a teacher and a manager drives them to develop a greater desire and more opportunities for dialogue with students while striving to become a good teacher. Regardless of what career path students may take in the future, student workers can share their own complex journey to becoming a teacher, addressing students' questions about academic learning, career planning, and overall personal development. In conversations with students in classrooms, campuses, or other spaces, genuinely revealing one's own understanding of work and life helps students build a comprehensive view of what it means to be a "higher education student affair worker".

"I didn't figure out what I really wanted to do until I was about 30, and that's when I experienced the joy of 'dreams coming true'. If any of you realize and achieve it earlier than I did, you'll be happier than I am now," or "If my shared experiences don't inspire your life and studies, you don't need to compare; instead, you should trust that you have your own pace," such "self-exposure" and 'self-analysis" aim to present a position where "teacher and student share the same journey—teachers are just those who arrived at the workplace before you. 'In a group of three, there must be my teacher.' You may also be my role model for learning. We grow together."

With this stance, higher education student affair workers and college students can achieve equal communication, reduce cognitive and informational "power imbalances", and transform educational narratives into heartfelt, warm exchanges. The "teacher's story" is rich and diverse, constantly providing fresh material for their narrative practice. Higher education student affair workers can empathize with students, continuously turning personal work experiences into valuable cases that aid student growth and development. This allows students to understand the daily realities of the student affair worker's job, fostering mutual understanding and empathy.

4.2.3 Narrating Stories about "Handling Matters"

Whether during their time as students or in their professional phase, specific "events" fill the daily lives of student affairs workers and students. In handling the case of a freshman who wanted to "drop out and return home to repeat the year because they felt they couldn't adapt," I tried to share a personal story from when I was promoted to high school and, due to "family's urgent need for money" and having paid a "high tuition fee," felt embarrassed and considered dropping out. I approached my homeroom teacher, asking to drop out and "get my tuition fees back." I openly explained that "the problem is temporary; in the end, we can solve it, and we don't have to choose the most 'extreme' way. How about trying to 'walk with the difficulty' instead?" The good news that this student eventually passed the graduate school entrance exam and returned to their hometown brought a sigh of relief. We were grateful that "he listened to what I said" and "he did what we agreed upon."

When students face challenges like adapting to university life, they can gain insights from the experiences of a student affairs worker who has been through it; when dealing with interpersonal conflicts, they can learn from how student affairs workers manage dormitory disputes; when confronted with the uncertainties of post-graduation, they can find comfort in the listening ear and encouragement provided by student affairs workers. By sharing these stories, we build a vision of possible realities.

The 20th-century philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin, in his work The Storyteller, quotes a German proverb: "The traveler must have a story to tell." This inspires us, as higher education student affairs workers, who are "travelers" in the journey of supporting young students in their growth and success, to realize that we certainly have many stories to tell—and indeed, many stories we can share.

## 5. Summary

From "Great Principles" to "Lived Stories," the shift in the educational narrative of higher education student affairs workers is rooted in the daily "back-and-forth" communication with students. Research has pointed out that "in the interactions between teachers and students in higher education, there is more of a secondary form of interaction. Both teachers and students invest rationally and limitedly in these exchanges. It is very important to recognize the secondary nature of teacher-student communication, manage the boundaries and the sense of measure in the process, and to consider the appropriate form of discourse in different contexts, including the necessary distance [7]." When questions arise such as, "What's wrong with students these days?" or "What's wrong with higher education student workers these days?" the time factor of the present is often used as an explanation for the misbehavior of others. Even though we all acknowledge the potential benefits of digitalization and artificial intelligence for everyone, we cannot simply "avoid discussing it on the assumption that, in the long run, everyone will benefit [8]." We must also be cautious of "the malicious dialectics of the network," which is that "being connected to the internet does not necessarily mean being connected [9]."

"The touch of a hand has the same therapeutic effect as the voice of a storyteller. It can generate closeness and trust [10]." Similarly, the "AI higher education student affairs worker," with its ability to engage in deep conversations "anytime and anywhere," and face-to-face storytelling and listening are equally important. Research, which is based on "new knowledge and true emotions from real life [11]," using the method of autoethnographic analysis, helps bring us back to real life. It directly analyzes the transformation of one's own educational narrative and provides insight into the professional growth of student affairs workers. It offers a case study on how they can navigate the challenges of maintaining the strength and pace of their educational narratives in the era of digital intelligence.

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