

## **Gifted Practitioner**

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### **Introduction**

In the early 1800s the silt build up in the Mississippi River delta had become so deep that it was difficult for boats to move from the Gulf of Mexico up the river. Two engineers had different solutions to the removal of silt. One recommended that a canal be built and dredged so ships could travel freely through the delta. The other suggested that a series of breakers be built in an open V-like pattern [ \ / ] vertically in the middle of the delta to redirect the speed and flow of the river and create a riptide that would naturally remove the silt from the delta. Each solution was tried and each one worked. There was a significant difference, however. The canal required regular dredging to keep it clear. The riptide, once established, did not require additional resources to sustain the clean out process.

This story can be used as a metaphor for student affairs. As we interact in the bureaucracy of higher education, striving to provide an environment that maximizes the flow of learning, we may ask: “Are we building canals in our work, or riptides?” In our literature and our conversations we often hear stories about the amount of dredging we do in our daily work. We talk about the number of emails we receive each day, the number of meetings we attend, the programs to plan and implement, tasks to complete, and problems to solve. These are our forms of dredging. Like the Mississippi River delta story, it is possible to transform a system by building and dredging a canal. This process,

however, can be very tiring and continually consume our precious resources of time, energy, staff, and finances.

The breakers approach, on the other hand, is continually self-renewing and, thus, consumes less of our resources. What would the practice of student affairs look like if we created a riptide? The riptide uses the energy that already exists in the river system to aid in the solution of the problem. To create a riptide breakers must be inserted; a different point of view needs to be used to interrupt the flow; to imagine a different solution. The viewing point shifts from trying to control the system [by building a canal] to unleashing and transforming the energy in the system.

With this concept in mind, beginning in November 1999, we convened a series of focus group conversations with practitioners. The intent of the meetings was to explore the way we do our practice. We invited practitioners who were known to innovate within their work and who had successfully influenced change in their departments, divisions, and institutions. The focus groups revealed different descriptions of the practice of student affairs which resulted in the creation of riptides rather than canals. There have been many such meetings, taking place primarily at the regional and national meetings of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). The purpose of this article is to share the wisdom of these gifted practitioners and the implications that their ideas have for the field of student affairs.

## **The Power of Human Conversation**

### *The Process*

The basic format of this work was framed in conversations between people who professionals identified as innovators and effective change agents on their campuses. We used an approach titled “the power of human conversations” as the theoretical underpinning of the process. This concept states that the ideas with which we seed the conversation matter. For example, if we seed our conversations with victim mentalities, we will achieve one result. If, on the other hand, we seed conversations with stories about influence and change, we will achieve a different result.

The importance of human conversation is primary. Conversations spread along human networks to affect more than just the people who were in the initial conversation. Intentional conversations that generate energy and meaning will spread exponentially to impact many. We wanted to create a space where emergent knowledge could be shared through stories and ideas from gifted practitioners. The participants would in turn have an opportunity to reflect on the way they work, name what they do, make connections, and normalize the emergent practice through hearing stories from others. We framed the conversations in focus groups with a set of questions for each group. Our conversations were intentional and linked in the belief that the power of humans having meaningful conversations together would generate energy and attract others into widening circles of conversation that were seeded with values which unleash positive energy. These value based discussions would lead to innovations which would influence change in the creation of more powerful learning environments.

## **Conversations as a Point of Pause**

In a riptide, the purpose of breakers is to redirect the natural flow of the water. In our gifted practitioner focus groups, we found the conversations acted like these resistant points [breakers] in the Mississippi river delta. The conversations created a pause in the daily work and redirected the flow of energy for these practitioners. The day long focus groups, allowed the “silt” of our day to day activity to flow out of our attention span and created a “riptide” that moved our viewing point. We shifted from a traditional to an emergent view of our practice that was filled with meaning and purpose and directed toward systems change to impact the quality of the learning environment in higher education

## **Emergent View of Student Affairs**

The riptide metaphor uses the energy already embedded in the system and unleashes it. The reflections of gifted practitioners revealed that they utilize an approach to organizational energy and change which is similar to the riptide. These practitioners are not building canals; rather they are creating relationships across their institutions which they use to create the riptides. As they developed relationships with others, they found that change became possible where formal power or position had failed. It was

through the quality of their relationships that the fundamental interdependence of all individuals in higher education was recognized. This helped to remind all that there was a common purpose that brought each to the table. Recognizing that student affairs, academic affairs, administrative units, financial affairs and students were all interrelated, helped to move the collective perception of the institution toward wholeness. This in turn allowed conversations to occur on how to increase the quality of the overall learning environment. The energy was unleashed.

We believe that these gifted practitioners are articulating an emergent view of student affairs that echoes the original Student Personnel Point of View (SPPV) written in 1937 (Evans et al, 1998, p. 6). The SPPV statement is more a philosophy of education than a description of the role of student affairs within the academy. These gifted practitioners are acting as agents of change focused on improving the quality of the learning environment for students. They act out of a philosophical base which may then be translated to a number of roles and circumstances.

## **Gifted Practitioner Conversations**

### *Background Assumptions*

The gifted practitioner conversations started with the following assumptions:

- The project sought to balance practitioners' voices with current literature to create a dynamic tension through which generative wisdom could flow.

- The conversations assumed that gifted practitioners can teach us something new about student affairs.
- Gifted practitioners can provide “living wisdom” of the evolutionary state of the field.
- Gifted practitioners can come from anywhere in the organization. They are not bound by position, age, or longevity.
- Often their voices and expertise go unheard because they do not usually have the time to reflect and write about their thoughts and wisdom.
- These practitioners tinker at the edge of practice and continually look for new and different ways of having an impact on their institutions, students, and the learning environment. Eventually this tinkering may evolve into a theory or publication.
- If we want capture this wisdom, we need to give these creative practitioners an opportunity to share their stories and thoughts with others.

### *Questions Worth Asking*

Sharon Parks, author of Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith, and others believe that well formulated questions can elicit rich information and knowledge that may be turned into collective wisdom. The following examples represent the kind of questions which we asked our groups as we met throughout the country:

- What are you currently curious about?
- What is the root / source of your passion for your work?
- How do you engage others in change?
- How do you pursue your own personal growth and development?
- How has your personal development shaped the way you practice student affairs?
- How did participating in a previous conversation affect the way you practice?

### *Insights into Personal Practice*

These conversations generated a rich set of ideas on innovative practice in both the participants' personal practices and in their student affairs practice; especially around influencing change in higher education.

The personal practices in which these individuals engaged helped them to gain a more holistic sense of themselves. Their broad range of interests helped them become more multi-faceted as individuals. They had developed habits of reflection which gave them greater self awareness. All of their personal practices provided them with ideas that increased their “out of the box” approach to their work. The following highlights capture four themes of these personal practices.

- **Curiosity** is at the heart of the gifted practitioner. These individuals read outside the boundary of traditional higher education literature. The multi-disciplinary nature of their reading – including science fiction, mysteries, business, future

visioning, history, psychology, spirituality - seeded their thinking in different ways which was reflected in their personal and work lives. The concept of this kind of curiosity is captured by a quote in My Ishmael:

“Thinkers aren’t limited by what they know, because they can always increase what they know. Rather they’re limited by what puzzles them, because there is no way to become curious about something that doesn’t puzzle you. If a thing falls outside the range of people’s curiosity, then they simply *cannot* make inquiries about. It constitutes a blind spot – a spot of blindness that you can’t even know is there until someone draws attention to it ”  
(Quinn, 1997, p.65).

- They also have a **wide variety of interests and hobbies** that take them away from the routine of work. These individuals talked of becoming a gourmet cook, a master gardener, being out in nature, music, yoga, kayaking, volunteering in their communities, and traveling among other things. These practitioners shared how these interests helped shape who they have become as individuals and how their personal growth has affected their approach to their practice. They saw through different lenses. These diverse experiences coupled with a wide-ranging mind provide them with ideas from multiple areas, seen through multiple lenses, that they apply to their work.

- They engage continuously in personal **growth**. A main theme that was repeated over and over was the focus on their personal and professional growth. For example, “I seek out good thinkers that don’t let me stay in the same place.” Or “I’m attracted to ‘out of the box’ growth areas which in turn impacts the intellectual and mental training of my staff.” Another practitioner discussed how her personal focus on simplifying her life has helped her simplify the way she works. Others talked about their spiritual journeys and how “faith and relationships become a source of support that allow them to take more risks.
- In the follow up sessions, we discovered that just providing people with a chance to **reflect** on their practice was significant. One practitioner stated, “the only way you can stay alive in your work is to think about it; otherwise it becomes a task.” The act of reflection helps practitioners stay centered. We found that the practitioner dialogues acted as a form of reflection. As a result of these conversations, their practice continued to evolve. Just creating the space to make meaning of their work and to name their strategies took them to a new level of practice. This suggests that reflecting on our practice, individually and together, does have a powerful impact on the way we practice, encouraging greater confidence and risk taking. One individual told a story of how after the first set of conversations she articulated her vision for the university in meetings for the strategic planning process instead of following her previous habit which was to support the ideas of others.

## *Emergent Patterns of Professional Practice*

In addition to insights into personal practice, the focus group conversations elicited a variety of insights into how they practice their professional roles. The following four insights capture this focus:

- They have a keen **sense of purpose** that transcends the activity driven nature of our daily lives. They can transcend the overwhelming “lists and demands” with intention and connection. They are almost always thinking on multiple levels. For many, passion and meaning for their work starts with a clear understanding of their purpose for doing this work. The language they used to discuss their purpose was the language of the heart, not the head. They spoke of seeking a values fit within the college environment, helping others learn and grow, bringing people together and crossing boundaries, connecting what they do to something larger, leaving a legacy, and a belief in the power of transformation and change. These individuals connect their purpose with the commons rather than to their self-interest. These touchstones seemed to help them maintain their focus in the midst of the seeming endless interruptions of our daily work lives. Their purpose framed the intentions that wove meaning and alignment throughout their work.
- They are all skilled at building quality **relationships** based in integrity. They believe that influencing change starts with the relationship not the position or power to which they may have access. One individual stated, “Change follows

along relationship lines. If you can develop a relationship based on trust and integrity, anything becomes possible.” This strategy was stated over and over again. These quality relationships transcended traditional boundaries. The relationships were not based in expediency or political transactions. Rather they were closer to covenant relationships with colleagues.

- These gifted practitioners are **agents of change**, not stability. They often used organic strategies and images of change when describing their ways of influencing. For example, they have found conversations a powerful way to set the stage for change. Rather than beginning with action or a vision, they have conversations. These conversations sow the seeds of change and lead to mutual commitment and cooperation across boundaries that influence change on multiple levels.

The way in which these practitioners think about change is interesting and different. One practitioner described influencing systems change this way. “First I intuit the tensions and conflicts that currently exist in the institution around a specific issue. Then I have conversations that capture the imagination and possibilities that a change could bring about. In additional conversations, I use these possibilities to attract others to the possibilities. There are lots of iterations of what kind of change needs to occur. In fact each conversation and combination of people help shape the final version of change. I don’t actually seek support from my boss until I am 1/3 to 1/2 of the way through the process. What might

have been too great of a risk at the beginning actually appears do-able part way through the process. The whole change process is about bringing people together and helping them align their actions with the mission and values of the community.”

- These practitioners **assume they are essential** to the future of their institutions. They assume they have a role in helping the institution evolve. This was beautifully captured in this quote, “I just assume we have a right to be at the table, if we are not, it couldn’t have been a very good meeting.” This attitude reflects a fundamental shift around influencing change. Traditionally, student affairs practitioners have perceived themselves at the margins of the institution and, therefore, they do not have the right to be at the table where institutional decisions are made.

### **Connections to Emergent Themes in Student Affairs**

One implication of the gifted practitioner conversations is the number of comments they made about having an opportunity to have a conversation that reminded them of their passion or how helpful it was to pause and reflect on the meaning of their work. Comments like “this conversation gave me energy.” “Why are these conversations so difficult to have on our own campus?” and “I feel renewed” were typical responses. This raises an interesting question – why is it so difficult to talk about the meaning and practice of our work? Why do we feel comfortable defaulting to discussions of tasks, problems, or activities?

In these conversations an emergent view of the practice of student affairs was revealed. This view was not about the “stuff” we have to do. Rather, this view dealt with the purpose, passion, and philosophy of student affairs and how these professionals were claiming a space within the institution to influence change in order to create student centered learning environments. The language of these conversations attracted ideas on the common good and balanced both the head and heart. The participants in some ways seemed to be thanking us for creating an opportunity which invited a deeper exploration of our work. For a moment we transcended the busyness of the day-to-day in a community of colleagues. This process lifted their view from the grindstone toward the horizon.

### **Continuing the Conversation**

Two frameworks that reflect the tension between our current and emergent state of practice can be seen in Fritjof Capra and David Stendl-Rast’s book, Belonging to the Universe and Marcia Baxter Magolda’s book, Making their Own Way. Baxter Magolda’s work focuses on the development of self-authorship.

Capra and Stendl-Rast reflect on the traditional and emergent views in physics and spirituality. What is interesting is the similarity between the emergent views of these different disciplines. We present three dimensions of their work as a point of reference to frame the traditional and emergent view of student affairs. What we have found in the

gifted practitioner dialogues reflects the emergent view to which Capra and Stendl-Rast speak.

Traditional Worldview	Emergent Worldview
<p><b>Parts perspective:</b> where the dynamics of the whole can be understood from the parts.  <i>Examples within student affairs – we use language of departments, divisions, and see ourselves as fragments or expendable parts of the whole. We generate an understanding of the field through research that measures impact on the small parts of the work.</i></p>	<p>The properties of the parts only can be <b>understood from the dynamics of the whole</b>. What we call a part is merely a pattern in an inseparable web of relationships.  <i>Examples from student affairs – we co-create a learning environment; we are essential to the learning enterprise</i></p>
<p><b>Objective / universal context:</b> descriptions are objective, independent of the human observer and the process of knowledge  <i>Examples within student affairs include – fairness means treating everyone the same; the assumptions on which most of our institutions are based reflect the belief that individuals can be independent and objective observers and that bias from their experience has not shaped what they see and how services are structured or professional standards are based; we believe that a program from one institution can be transferred to another</i></p>	<p><b>Context is unique and diverse:</b> the understanding of the process of knowledge is to be included in the description  <i>Examples from student affairs include – designing services that allow for individual response and treating students uniquely; realizing that each context is filled with diversity and uniqueness and therefore ideas and programs cannot be transferred from one context to another without being adapted for the culture of the organization.</i></p>
<p><b>Building knowledge piece by piece:</b> fundamental laws, fundamental principles, basic building blocks build knowledge  <i>Examples from student affairs include – the separation of services where the students need to make connections for themselves rather than providing seamless service; our literature reflects piece-by-piece building of knowledge.</i></p>	<p><b>Reality becomes a network of relationships:</b> reality is a network of relationships  <i>Examples from student affairs include – the student centered learning environment connects the students to each other and their learning; involvement theory builds connections through relationships; change happens through relationships and networks.</i></p>

The emergent worldview that Capra and Stendl-Rast (p. xi – xv) have articulated is similar to the emergent worldview of student affairs that is reflected in the gifted

practitioners dialogues. The practitioners have moved beyond the traditional assumptions and actions and as a result have shifted their practice. In this way, they may be pioneers in a shift occurring in the field of student affairs.

Another way of framing the themes from the gifted practitioner dialogues is that these practitioners have engaged in a journey toward self-authorship within the field. Baxter Magolda states that the journey toward self-authorship is a shift from an external definition of self to an internal definition of self. The practitioners in these dialogues have clearly done this for themselves, and have extended this internal locus of control to their practice within the field of student affairs. We did not see or hear any language or behaviors that reflected the victim mentality or second-class citizenship that has traditionally characterized the field of student affairs. In fact these gifted practitioners are self-authorizing - presenting a view of the field in which they see themselves as full partners within the academy; having core values that will improve the quality of learning; and developing authentic relationships across traditional boundaries to influence change in higher education. They see themselves fully as educators in the best sense of the word.

## **Implications and Questions**

### *Graduate Preparation / Staff Development*

The themes of self-authorship, focus on purpose, becoming agents of change, reading outside of the field, and other ideas discovered in these dialogues have a variety

of implications for both student affairs staff and graduate preparation programs. For example, what would a graduate class look like if it promoted self-authorship? What would supervision look like if self-authorship was the goal instead of controlling / supervising the task of the employee? What more would we need to teach students and staff if we really expected them to influence higher education from wherever they were in the organization? How might we open people to a broad range of ideas?

This work has many implications for how we prepare our students and how we engage in continuous staff development. The multidisciplinary perspectives that these gifted practitioners bring challenge us to encourage reading outside the field and to expand our own reading as well. What would happen if our graduate preparation programs assigned 50% of their reading from outside the field? What would happen if we encourage enough balance in our staff members' lives that they could develop hobbies outside of their work? In our conversations, it was clear that some of the innovations that the gifted practitioners imagined arose from insights that were transferred from outside interests.

### *Knowledge Base for Systems Change*

The **knowledge base** for systems change includes systems thinking, organic change strategies, understanding organizational culture, and leadership (Allen and Cherrey, 2000). The skills for influencing change include collaboration, identifying leverage points, active engagement, and capacity for profound change in both personal

and organizational transformation (Allen and Cherrey, 2000). Where are we currently teaching these skills and knowledge bases?

### *Possibility*

In one of our conversations, we asked practitioners to reflect on “**magical**” work experiences they had in their career. The individuals who were attracted to the gifted practitioner conversations could all think of current or past experiences that they defined as magical. One staff member said, “It was a place that taught me that anything was possible.” What is the connection between these good working environments and innovative practice? What connects magical work experiences to the building of efficacy in people to influence change? How can we support the development of these experiences within the workplace? And how can we support individuals who are trying to replicate these magical work environments in new positions?

### *Purpose*

Another implication is the importance of conversation that invites the exploration of **meaning and purpose** into our daily lives. Without this connection to something greater than ourselves, it is easy to lose focus on what we are trying to accomplish in the end. It reminds us of the story of the daughter learning to cook a ham from her mother. As she watched, her mother cut off the end of the ham. The daughter asked why she did that. Her mother responded, “It’s how my mother told me to do it”. When the daughter talked to her grandmother, she received a different answer – the pan was too small and so “I needed to cut off the end of the ham to fit it into the pan”. Our purpose and the

meaning we bring to our work help us adapt to changing conditions within the work environment. Inviting others to reconnect with why they came into the field and what they want to accomplish as well as articulating the meaning behind our actions are ways to keep the field conscious and intentional. In a world where 100 emails a day is not unusual, meaning and intention become even more important.

### **Summary**

The insights from the many focus groups on practice have provided a deep and rich set of data, only part of which we have been able to summarize in this article. Primarily, these dialogues have provided a glimpse into an alternative view of the practice of student affairs; one that is connected with both our past and our future. The other interesting insight comes from the power of the process. The conversations became a powerful way of helping people to reflect on their practice and led people to new places or reminded them of their beliefs and values that shape their work.

Here are some strategies for accessing creative practice within oneself or staff:

- *Power of human conversation* – provide time for staff members to talk to each other about how they do their work. See conversations with others who provide different perspectives. Our default position is to talk about the content of our work, not the process of how we do it. Shifting our staff

members and our selves out of the content and into the process of the work takes the conversation to a different level. The use of questions establishes a place of inquiry rather than answers. The kinds of questions seed the conversation with ideas and values that we need to pay attention to in order to release creative practice.

- *Pay attention to the language* used by staff members. The language of meaning, purpose and passion needs to be present and in balance with language of instrumental efficiency. Encourage language of passion, of the heart, and of responsibility
- *Share emergent knowledge and practice* with staff members and the field. What we learn from our conversations can be expanded when shared with others. The creative innovations from one individual can be spread to others if they are talked about. This is how we become a learning community within the field, through sharing knowledge about practice.

We found that the responses in the conversations with these practitioners were linked. The personal growth on an individual impacted on their practice, and their values shaped their purpose. In the end they modeled integrated learning. The questions seemed to elicit integrated answers. Finally, the power of these conversations suggest that creating spaces where people can reflect and generate knowledge together can be an important role for NASPA to move the field forward.

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