

Student Affairs as Change Agents

"Thirty years from now the big university campuses will be relics. Universities [in their present form] won't survive. It's as large a change as when we first got the printed book (Peter Drucker, 1997).

Drucker is well known for identifying a trend before others see it. If his statement about universities turns out to be true, he foresees many changes ahead for higher education. This is not a surprise to many involved in higher education. However, the question of whether higher education can adapt, and who can help facilitate these changes remain unclear. It is the authors' belief that student affairs professionals have a critical role in helping their institutions to transform themselves in response to outside challenges. This article examines the dynamics of change in today's world, why traditional rules of change no longer apply, and identifies new realities of change. Finally it will suggest some strategies that student affairs professionals can apply in helping institutions of higher education to change.

The Dynamics of Change are Changing

When Stanley Ikenberry was selected as President of The American Council on Education, he was asked to describe the current challenges facing higher education; he summed it up in one word, *change* (Ikenberry, 1996). Others echo Ikenberry's point of view. For example, John Duderstadt, former president of the University of Michigan, shared the results of an informal survey he had conducted on how faculty and administrators in higher education assess the degree

of change they believe universities will undergo. He asked various groups to rank this degree of change on a scale of one to ten, with zero as status quo and ten as radical change. He found that faculty responded at three or four, administrators at seven or eight, and university presidents with numbers off the scale (Duderstadt, 1997). Why would there be such a discrepancy? One of the explanations of the varying views on change may be the different breadth of connections each group has with changes occurring beyond the boundaries of the institutions. Presidents often find themselves in external situations where they may benefit from seeing the patterns of challenges that other institutions are experiencing, and relating them with their own. They are also in situations where they receive feedback from external constituents including legislators, donors, foundations, community members, and corporations.

Administrators often have boundary spanning responsibilities, similar to presidents but with less scope. Faculty members, who are enmeshed in their discipline, may see changes in their field, but may not see similar patterns of change in other disciplines. Faculty members who are well connected to other aspects of the university community, such as faculty in residence, would most likely see a greater magnitude of change due in part to the breadth of their connections. The pressures to change are already here and will continue to exist. However Duderstadt's informal research and Drucker's comments would suggest that some people both in and outside higher education see the magnitude and speed of change increasing.

Increasing Speed and Magnitude of Change

The number of change events in our lives seems to be increasing at ever-higher rates. Many of have felt the pressure of this kind of change. Change events are not limited to the work place;

they are occurring in family systems, personal lives, and in society. The sheer number of change events is just one dimension of the magnitude of change in our lives and in the lives of our institutions (Conner, 1995).

In addition to an increased number of change events there is also a decrease in the amount of time between change events (Conner, 1995). A traditional notion of change was like a big storm gathering over a lake. One could see it coming, would have enough time to seek shelter or dress appropriately, but eventually the storm would blow over and the lake would return to normal. The faculty who ranked change on a scale of three or four may be thinking of change as a storm blowing across the lake; all they have to do is ride it out and things will return to normal. Today, events are coming so quickly that, instead of periods of calm between storms, change is ongoing; now it is like living in a world of permanent white water (Vaill, 1996). Those presidents who indicated a score of 20 on Duderstadt's informal survey are living in the permanent perils of those white water rapids.

Dee Hock describes this phenomenon as the disappearance of change float (Hock, 1999; Waldrop, 1996). Float was the term used to describe the time it took for a check to clear the bank. Twenty years ago, this check-writing float could be up to a week; now a check clears almost instantaneously due to electronic transfers. The loss of float time in check processing is a metaphor for what is occurring in many other aspects of life. A world that operates without float is already impacting higher education. The perfect image of organizational float in higher education is embedded in the way registration used to be conducted in the 1970s and 80s. During these times students would gather in a gym and stand in various lines waiting to sign up

for class. After going through this phase, a schedule was mailed within a week announcing a student's final schedule. Clearly there were many time delays in the process of registration and the expectation on the part of students and administrators alike, was that it was a time consuming process and patience was required. Now registration in many places is conducted on-line or over the phone and the results are instantaneous. This change has created a different dynamic in the ways student affairs professionals respond to not only the demands of students, but also to parents, faculty, and other administrators. There is no tolerance for waiting until the current storm blows over. The expectation in the system is for ongoing, instantaneous, and real-time response.

Living in Permanent White Water

Anyone who has watched a series of storms roll across a lake knows that each one interacts with previous and upcoming storms, whipping up endless waves. This condition of ongoing waves is like the world of practice for student affairs professionals. Peter Vaill (1996) describes this experience as living in a world of permanent white-water and identifies five characteristics of this phenomenon. The first characteristic is that permanent white water conditions are full of surprises. When highly connective, dynamic, and complex systems interact; problems that show up in one area interact with other systems and trigger unexpected problems. The second characteristic of permanent white water is that complex systems tend to produce novel problems; problems that are not only unanticipated but are not even imagined by those within the system. The third characteristic of permanent white water is that events are messy and ill structured and cannot be easily delegated. The ramifications involve people throughout a wide variety of operations who may simultaneously feel the effects of other white water events just when you

need their cooperation and involvement. Everything is connected to everything else, which means that one person in one department alone cannot solve these kinds of problems without collaboration across boundaries in the institution and sometimes beyond. The fourth characteristic of permanent white water conditions is that they are often extremely costly. They may be expensive in terms of dollars or in terms of some other scarce resource in the system, like pulling staff away from more important work. Surprising, novel, and messy problems unfold and feed on themselves in their ramifications, rather than displaying their implications all at once. Often the way you solve the initial problem can come back to haunt you over time. The fifth characteristic of permanent white water conditions is the problem of recurrence. The possibility of recurrence makes one ask whether or not a particular white water event could have been anticipated, or whether anything like it will occur again. Or whether or not a new system should be designed to forestall this type of event in the future - which often creates an increase in red tape and bureaucratic complexities. Over time, organizations or systems cannot be protected against all eventualities without paralyzing them.

There are many examples of these characteristics in student affairs work. Table One correlates Vaill's five characteristics of permanent white water with typical phrases and questions reflecting the daily practice of student affairs professionals.

Table One

Permanent White Water in Student Affairs

Vaill's Characteristics	Student Affairs Checklist
1. "Full of surprises"	<i>... and we say we like our work because there is so little routine!</i> How many times are you surprised by a decision, problem, or a student's actions in a week.... a day?
2. "Produce novel problems"	<i>... just when you thought you saw it all.</i> Do your problems seem to mutate into stronger more virulent strains? Do you ever see an end to the variations of student conduct/crisis situations?
3. "Messy and ill structured"	<i>Some days it seems like all we do is clean up messes.</i> Does your span of responsibility surpass your level of authority? Are you spending more time on the "other tasks as assigned" category of your job description?
4. "Costly implications over time"	<i>Are the messes taking longer to clean up; do some seem to be immortal?</i> Ever wonder when the implications for a problem from two years ago are going to end? Ever wonder if everyone is dealing with the same five students?
5. "Recurrence"	<i>Just when you thought your handbook was done....</i> Does your policy handbook keep expanding? Do you ever wonder if your policies can't cover everything?

The conditions of permanent white water can cause student affairs professionals to experience work as a game of survival. However, there is a way to live with these conditions and still have a positive influence; it just takes a shift in how one leads and works in an organization. Most organizations are organized around principles of control and stability. In this kind of organization, the focus would be on what's not working and how to increase control so that deviations from the standard would not occur. Under conditions of permanent white water, organizations may mistakenly try to maintain and increase control. This is futile, since conditions of permanent white water eliminate one's ability to control the situation. Some organizations have shifted from principles of control to adapting to the turbulence. These institutions scan the environment to see what might affect them in the future and anticipate a response to these forces. This is also futile because under conditions of permanent white water the connections between cause and effect may be distant or invisible due to the many variables in play at any one time. Neither response effectively responds to conditions of permanent white water. Another way to respond to these condition involves both actively shaping these dynamic networks and living with them. These organizations increase the flexibility of their institutions so they can respond to constant change without needing to totally restructure.

Shorter Shelf Life for Solutions

The permanent white water characteristics of student affairs work increases the complexity of change which results in a shorter shelf life for solutions. An example of this combination of increasing change events, increasing complexity, and decreasing time between change events comes from a child's riddle called *Lily Pads* (Connor, 1993). The riddle starts out by telling the

child that there is a pond and in this pond there is one lily pad and the number of lily pads doubles every day. After 30 days, the whole pond is completely filled with lily pads. The question in the child's riddle: On what day was the pond half full? Many children will respond the 15th day; the actual answer is the 29th day. The 29th day is when the pond is half full, and when it doubles in the next 24 hours, it completely fills the pond on the 30th day. This story illustrates that the amount of time to solve problems may be much shorter than anticipated. In other words, welcome to the 29th day, higher education!

The examples of change in our lives are not a surprise, but interestingly enough, the need for higher education to respond to change appears surprising to many in the organization. If one looks at the slow response to change in institutions, one would think that higher education believes that it has, metaphorically, many days before the lily pond is full. If higher education does not increase its capacity for change, Peter Drucker's prediction that university campuses will become relics may come true. How can traditional institutions of higher education adapt sufficiently to remain valuable to prospective students and society?

Shifting Assumptions about Change

Do traditional change strategies work in a world of permanent white-water? How do the dynamics of change effect the way organizations change? The authors believe it is time to question the traditional assumptions about how change occurs in organizations and develop new assumptions that fit the context in which student affairs practitioners and higher education exists. Traditional assumptions include: change can only be initiated from the top, one person can't fight

city hall, and change is incremental and controllable (Allen and Cherrey, 2000). In the following section, these assumptions will be examined and new assumptions about change will be presented.

Change is Initiated at the Top

The first assumption about change is the belief that change can only be initiated from the top down in the organization. This is evident in conversations when a new idea comes forward, and everybody asks, "what will the president say?" For example, when a new performance appraisal system was recently implemented at a Midwest college, it required mandatory training by everyone in the institution. The attendees at the training asked if the president and her staff were going to go through training too. The implication was, they weren't going to learn this new process if the president didn't support and endorse it. Her presence was seen as an indicator of her endorsement. This assumption that change is initiated from the top is also evident when everyone asks about the new president's vision. The tacit understanding is that the president's vision is the sole driver in the changes that will occur in the institution.

Paradoxically, many presidents and vice presidents will say that employees most often create the possibility for positive changes as well as the constraints to change. Therefore, when perceived from the perspective at the top of an organization, change can be initiated from anywhere and in some ways, is easier to respond to and support change that is happening in the middle or bottom of an organization. For example, when a director sees a problem in the division and comes up with a recommendation on how to solve it, the supervisor's role, in turn, becomes one of support rather than problem solver. In this example, change can be initiated from anywhere. If the

individual is particularly adept at resisting any movement, over time the department's ability to serve and develop students will diminish. On the other hand, if a director is actively seeking to improve the department, the supervisor's job is much different. The director initiates the potential for change and the vice president's job is one of ensuring alignment and providing support and encouragement. Barry Oshry (1995) extends this idea when he states that there is immense power to change the system in the ranks of middle managers. He believes that when they work together, aligning their work around core values, and communicating with each other, they can more effectively create change than any other point in the system.

Moreover, many of us have initiated change on our campuses without needing a directive from the president. In shared leadership, change can occur from anywhere in the organization and in fact most organizations depend on this kind of initiative. When employees at all levels of an organization revolve around a set of core values and purpose, and constantly adapt their work to pace the rapidly changing external environment, they provide the institution with an increased flexibility for quick response. These core values are embedded in the organizational culture and can be identified and mutually shaped by the staff. In rapidly changing times, presidents can't keep up with the demands of telling everyone what to do. Healthy organizations are leader-full rather than leader-led institutions.

One Person Can't Fight City Hall

The second assumption that we often have about change is that one person can't fight city hall or influence a system so why try? This supports the belief that one person can't do anything to solve organizational problems. Further, the people who are perceived to be in control are too big,

unreachable, and powerful for a front-line employee to have an impact. Sometimes people who believe this myth are recognizable by the frequency of their complaints followed by their belief that they have no responsibility to act. If one believes that one can't fight city hall or the administration, then one's role in change is to abdicate responsibility rather than to initiate change.

However, if we replaced this current assumption with a new reality or set of assumptions that "one person can make a difference" then another set of behaviors would prevail. Stories of one person making a difference, or a social movement where many people over time effected significant change, suggest that with persistence, change can happen from anywhere. This reality has been a favorite conference theme over the years in student affairs. It would suggest that the people who are attracted to the field do indeed believe that individuals can make a difference. The new reality of change is that one person or group can make a difference, and if we believe in this new reality, student affairs practitioners may be more likely to engage in institutional change.

Change is Incremental and Controllable

The third current assumption is that change is incremental and occurs in a controllable sequence. This approach suggests that the organization is like a car; the president gets into the driver's seat, starts the car and drives off in the direction that the president wants the institution to go. The implication is that a person can decide where to go and is able to control the events sufficiently to get to a specific destination. Not only does the car arrive at its destination, but also the progress can be measured in increments along the way by the mile markers that it passes. However, this

metaphor is extraordinarily flawed. Our myth of change as a directed, controlled event does not match our experience. We know that change is not simple.

In today's world creating change is becoming increasingly complex. The image of the car is not an accurate description of the way things change. A new way of thinking about the change process can be found in the book, *Common Fire* (Parks Dolaz, Keen, Keen and Dolaz Parks, 1996). This book profiles 100 individuals who have sustained a commitment to the common good over the course of their lives. If one works out of a mechanistic or control model of how things work, complexity can be dangerous. However when one works from an organic model, the interconnectedness is actually an asset because sometimes by solving one problem another problem is solved as well (Cherrey and Allen, 2001; Wheatley, 1996). Problems can spread through an organization, but hope or solutions can proliferate as well in an organic system. So the challenge is to pinpoint the place where an intervention will use the dynamics of the system to bring it health. This reflects a very different kind of assumption about the process of change. It assumes that the organization is a living system. In this view, a person is a part of the larger system and all one's actions affect the whole not just a single part. Once a partner-like relationship with the living system is understood, the change agent only needs to nudge the organization in order to trigger the natural movement toward health. Using the organic dynamics of the system allows a change agent to actively work with others and the system in order to create change.

The assumptions that change can be initiated from anywhere, that one person can make a difference, and that using organic dynamics to trigger change are more positive and more

empowering images of change. They provide hope and emphasize responsibility to constructively move the organization toward greater capacity. Whenever someone wants to trigger change, it helps to reflect on traditional assumptions and see if they are inhibiting capacity and potential for transforming the organization.

Each current assumption and new assumption has a set of behaviors that flow from it. Table two summarizes the current assumptions that individuals have about change and the new realities of change.

Table Two

Current assumptions	New Assumptions
<p><i>Change only occurs from the top</i></p> <p>Therefore: If I'm not in charge; I'll wait to be told.</p>	<p><i>Change occurs from anywhere</i></p> <p>Therefore: I can initiate change from wherever I am.</p>
<p><i>One person can't fight city hall</i></p> <p>Therefore: Why try; it's too big; too impossible.</p>	<p><i>One person can make a difference</i></p> <p>Therefore: With persistence, I can influence complex structures.</p>
<p><i>Change occurs incrementally through direction and control</i></p> <p>Therefore: Change only occurs in small sequential steps.</p>	<p><i>Change occurs organically</i></p> <p>Therefore: We can actively shape a living system; the system is a partner in change and can support change; change is easier due to the</p>

	interconnections of the system and can result in quantum leaps.
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Assumptions about change can be held on both an individual and organizational level. In order for student affairs professionals to become leaders with others for institutional change, we need to shift individual and group assumptions about change. It will require student affairs professionals to move toward these new realities of change and shift behavior accordingly.

Triggering Change

Student affairs practitioners have many capacities and insights to help transform their colleges and universities. They have been actively influencing individuals, groups, and organizational culture for years. However, these influencing strategies often are limited in focus on students rather than on the institution. The authors suggest that it is time for student affairs professionals to influence both the institution and the student in order to help facilitate the needed changes in higher education.

The following suggested strategies may assist student affairs professionals who want to embrace the principle of holistic learning and a shared leadership role for initiating institutional change (Rogers, 1995).

1. *Find a handful of early adopters* that are attracted by similar values, passion, principle, or vision for what needs to change (Rogers, 1995). Seek out and build relationships with these individuals and learn how to identify and support innovators and early adopters in the

organization. These are the people that bring life to the organization. Over time create a coalition of people around the change. Rarely does traditional top-down change happen and if it does, it may not be sustained. Successful change requires a coalition consisting of people in both positional and non-positional leadership who bring a wide variety of skills and knowledge to the table (Kotter, 1996). Since organizations are organic in nature, the varied members of a coalition are better able to match the complexity of the system.

2. *Develop structures that facilitate ways for people to connect and share information in the organization.* To influence a system one must be able to communicate across the multiple levels and divisions within the organization. These communication and connecting structures help give innovators and early adopters a forum for disseminating their ideas. Use "all-staff" meetings, ongoing dialogues, book discussion groups, and learning conversations as vehicles to seed new ideas into the organization. In these situations, observe who seems to be attracted to the kind of changes that need to happen in higher education.

3. *We all must change individually as well.* If organizations must make change, so must the persons who work in the organization. Individuals can become stagnant just like organizations do. In today's tumultuous world, organizations need to make deep change more frequently. This, in turn, requires one to make deep personal change as well. The most difficult aspect of change is seeing it as something that needs to happen in others. Sometimes individuals must look inward and step outside the safety of our prescribed roles. To bring about deep change internally involves risk. Quinn (1996) calls this, "walking naked into the land of uncertainty" (p. 10). Change agents can be found at any level in an organization.

They can be identified by their capacity to make deep change in themselves, their relationships, and the organization. If student affairs is to influence higher education, we must look at ourselves and what deep change we need to collectively engage in as well.

4. *Courage will arrive later; passion drives our involvement.* The choice is ours. There is plenty of evidence that individuals make differences in organizations. In the book *Some Do Care: Contemporary Lives of Moral Commitment* there are stories of individuals who created meaningful change in their communities and organizations (Colby and Damon, 1992). These people do not see themselves as courageous even though others do. They say that they got involved in change because their values and passions led them to it. At some point in all their stories, they realized that they could not remain silent. Their courage came later. Higher education requires individuals who have a deep concern and passion for our future. We desire people in our institutions that will fiercely defend a better future for our students and our society.

Summary

Higher education can and must make a difference in society. Our students will impact the world in greater proportion than their numbers. Higher education needs to fulfill its promise to these students and society and prepare students to live and work in a challenging interdependent world. Our students learn in part by watching what we do as individuals and institutions. If we are to prepare students for the 21st century, we must work to transform our institutions and ourselves.

As student affairs professionals we have a choice. We can be frustrated by a lack of action and let that frustration stop us from responding. We can play the role of victim and wait around for someone else to tell us what to do. We can be resident cynics and take pot shots at others who are trying to create a better organization. We can lick our wounds and say it is too hurtful to try again. Or we can choose to build coalitions, partner with early adopters, and learn from others who are masters at creating change. If one cares enough, we can influence change no matter where one is in the organization. The time for student affairs to take a significant role is now.

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