

*A Conversation Edited By  
Larry G. Benedict and Nancy C. Stoll*

# Organizational Change

## *The Student Affairs Staff as Change Masters*

### Introduction

Colleges and universities, like the national economy, have been in a recession of their own in recent years. Increased costs, reductions in revenues from state and federal governments, budgetary shortfalls, and downsizing or "rightsizing" have placed enormous pressures on institutions of higher education. Often budget cuts seem to fall disproportionately on student affairs. Student affairs staff find themselves working not only smarter but harder as well, trying to cope with fewer resources. The old core of student development theory and language has been replaced with the language of strategic planning, program reduction and elimination, increased marketing, competition, and fiscal accountability.

At the same time, student affairs staff face increasing demands from both internal and external forces: diversity and multicultural issues, sexual harassment issues, tensions about political correctness, an increasing number of federal and state regulations, and increased scrutiny from parents, alumni, legislators, and community neighbors.

It is against this backdrop that the following conversation took place among members of the New England Student Affairs Think Tank at Suffolk University in Boston during the summer of 1992. The New England Student Affairs Think Tank was founded in 1988 as a program of the New England Resource Center for Higher Education at the University of Massachusetts at Boston. Under the leadership of Dr. Zelda Gamson, director of the center, the think tank brings together five times a year a

number of chief student affairs administrators from the six New England states. The purpose of the think tank is to build support and expertise among the participants. The group has focused on a range of issues, including community standards and diversity, relations with faculty, external and legal demands that affect policies and practices, standards for leadership, and management theories. The discussions are designed to raise the understanding of policy implications. Most recently the think tank has focused its attention on organizational structure, ways to reconfigure student affairs, and issues around organizational change. A number of conference presentations and articles have resulted from these discussions.

The following dialogue with six of the group's participants is representative of the conversations of the think tank. The six participants are: Joan Apple Lemoine, dean of student affairs, Western Connecticut State University; Larry G. Benedict, dean of Homewood Student Services, Johns Hopkins University (formerly vice president of student affairs, University of Southern Maine); Bobbie Knable, dean of students, Tufts University; Sheila Murphy, vice president and dean of students, Bradford College; Nancy Stoll, dean of students, Suffolk University; and Jack Warner, dean of student services, Bristol Community College.

### The Conversation

**Larry:** The think tank has spent a lot of time this year talking about the whole issue of organizational change both within student affairs and also within the individual institution. Today we would like to have a discussion that focuses on the level of interest for organizational change which exists among student affairs professionals. What nature should that change take and what kinds of roles do, or should, student affairs officers play in the whole issue of organizational change? I would like to start with the question, "What is the status of interest of organizational change among our student affairs practitioners?"

#### *The Need for Organizational Change*

**Jack:** There is a tremendous need for organizational change because old structures don't seem to work particularly well in a lot of our institutions, just as they don't seem to work in our national economy anymore....Countries that are emphasizing collaboration, interdependence, and cooperation are tending to produce superior quality and tending to do better economically within the modern world. Yet our classrooms are set up based on individuals learning alone, researching alone, and working competitively against other students in our grading structure. Our whole notion of instruction in the classroom consists of instructors telling these individuals how and what to learn. Student affairs is probably the one area...providing structures for students in their educational process to learn collaboratively and to learn the kinds of skills it will take to thrive in the coming decade. So I think there is probably more

interest among student affairs professionals than other educators for reviving structures to reflect...collaboration and interdependence, more inclusiveness...and more interest in showing leadership to provide avenues for students to really learn some of the skills that they are not learning in the traditional classroom environments and under other more traditional structures.

**Joan:** I think responding to continued calls for public accountability is also going to influence our organizational structures, whether it is from outcomes assessment, or students' right-to-know legislation, where we have to give potential students and certainly all employees a picture of our safe campus and a picture of graduation rates, or responding to the ADA legislation....Also we hear a lot lately about the TQM [Total Quality Management] movement, with its language of collaborative team work, continuous improvement, and customers as the basis for our work. How will that transfer to higher education and how will that impact us?

### *The Need for Organizational Change: Internal Drives*

**Bobbie:** I think that one of the things that we are noticing is the fact that there was tremendous growth in student affairs during the time when funds were available for colleges, even though institutions may not have necessarily felt a total commitment to student affairs and its importance to the whole educational enterprise. Now that there is competition for resources, I think there is a new questioning of the role that student services plays, and student affairs people who were unwilling in the past to think about institutional structure and their place in it now feel that structure is important to how they do their jobs. I know I used to believe that you didn't talk about hierarchical structures and your place in them any more than you talked about money and sex. It was not quite well bred to do that. Now as it becomes more competitive to get the resources to do my job adequately and as the accountability for all managers becomes greater, I realize there is a real need to care about structure. The place of student affairs professionals in our institutional structure is crucial to our being able to do what people expect of us.

**Nancy:** I wonder if anyone could take that point just a little bit further, in terms of what sorts of things you might see as structural changes for the future?

**Bobbie:** I think one is the increasing trend for vice presidents for student affairs to be more closely involved in the decision-making structure of the university, and toward a recognition that those areas in student affairs have a very important effect on the overall educational experience of students. Institutional decisions cannot be made well without the participation of student affairs people.

**Sheila:** The position Bobbie describes is ultimately the position that allows some element of parity among various enterprises of the colleges. It squarely places the students as at least as important to the enterprise as the buildings and the grounds and the other segments of the university that are described through the corporate structure of it. I think the danger of being in the change business right now is that the overriding agenda is

the fiscal agenda. Decisions are clearly being made based on their ability to save money or point in the direction of some new kind of efficiency. As we examine the kind of thinking that we do to formulate new structures, it is important to be intentional about identifying the educational gains or losses, the fiscal gains or losses, and the hierarchical gains or losses when we think about doing things in new ways. You can do lots of things to save money, which may or may not align with your original vision of what a well-structured student affairs program looks like.

**Jack:** Let me give you a specific example at a different level. In terms of the health service...for instance, instead of the medical model structure of a stand-alone operation that treats disease, it could be viewed as a health education operation that is carefully integrated with physical education programs, fitness centers, counseling centers, women's centers, and other structures that exist. There is an opportunity there to even organize the structures so that all of those components are identified as an organizational cluster, where the interdependence and the kind of shared authority for producing broad-based educational programs in the health area would be shared by a group of people who view it similarly.

### *Organizational Change and Institutional Values*

**Sheila:** There is a paradox of what we are talking about here....Student affairs officers as change agents, or change masters, is fundamentally a proactive notion. It is a visionary notion. You are out there ahead of the pack. You see something in rap music and you think through the implications of it. Could we have anticipated the self-help movement in psychology twenty years ago as leading to wellness centers and leading to what Jack did on his campus, that is, the change around health care and health education? You need to be thinking all the time about what you observe around you, and what are the student affairs implications in the institutional structure, which have built into it the opportunity to occasionally be the venture capitalist idea. You have to have some freedom to try something. If the only agenda is "what is the absolute least we can do," the absolute least amount of money we can invest [and still have a meaningful co-curricular experience for students, then] I am without useful advice about how you get out there in front of it.

All I do is figure out how to save money. I do nothing visionary. I find fifty thousand dollars every Friday afternoon, that's what I do. [Laughter] Finally, everyone comes forward with their fifty thousand dollars, moaning and groaning. Forty percent of the school year is spent on balancing the budget. It seems to me you have to be in front of it before you can really impact it because otherwise, you are sitting around the senior table, you've pushed the structure that far, you're there, you're present, and you're talking another language of student growth and development, the importance of the co-curricular experience and collaborative learning skills outside the classroom that Jack referred to earlier, to a group of people who are basically saying, "Find me fifty thousand dollars this afternoon." That's the bottom line.

**Bobbie:** During this period it is much more essential that we build our programs and decisions on shared values and that we understand what the values of the institution are, what the goals are, and what we hope to accomplish for our students in the time that we have them. I don't think that this discussion of values and goals is necessarily a discussion we are used to having with one another in our institutions. One of the difficulties for us in student affairs is to be sure that what we see as desirable outcomes for our students are in fact what other people in the institution see as desirable. Whatever the structure, it should provide an opportunity for some discussions and agreement about what the values and priorities are for student outcomes.

**Joan:** Let me give you an example outside the student affairs area. A friend of mine in the social work department said, "Well, Bush is recognizing a family structure [that] has a father and a stay-at-home mother taking care of the children." He hasn't said that, but that is the structure he is advocating as opposed to the family values. We can all see Murphy Brown, who certainly does not fit in with Bush's structure of family, but if you look at values that we advocate in the family—love, sharing, responsibility, and adults bringing up a child whether they are married, or whether male or female—that's the difference: structure versus values. He is advocating the structure. We all know what the structure is, but let's talk about what the values are, because we really haven't talked about them.

**Larry:** Are you suggesting that perhaps we should be talking more about making sure that student affairs people have a say in the values clarification process on campus, rather than necessarily the structure?

**Jack:** I think the reason we advocated for vice president-level positions for student affairs in the first place was that there would be direction to those values and the kinds of things we like to see institutions stand for. Then, from that position of influence in the structure, other structures may well emerge. If we value, for instance, interdependence, and collaborative learning, and building campus community, then we need to be in a position to influence the institution to move in those directions.

If we have a new direction, a new value, a new principle that we want to see somehow imbedded within the institutional culture, we also need to be prepared to say what we are going to give up in order to achieve the new value, and this is very difficult. I found that we couldn't support an intercollegiate athletic program if we wanted to have the new value of a fitness center in a much broader-based health promotion program. So the athletic center program went—not without some pain, but it had to go because there were no new resources for what we needed to do in the new area. However, the existing resources are more than adequate to handle the new emphasis. In fact, where fifty people were benefiting from the same resource, over one thousand benefited from the reallocation. As long as everyone understands what's being given up, and agrees to it, we can implement new structures which reflect our most important values. But this is a change process which is not easy to affect, because there are more sacred cows in higher education than in any pasture. Some of our sacred cows have to be slain before some new order is going to emerge.

### *The Role of the Chief Student Affairs Officer*

**Larry:** How do you make sure that the discussion [about values] is occurring on campuses?

**Bobbie:** You have to make sure that you are present at policy and decision-making meetings so that it is possible to have some influence on these decisions...so you can try to shape [them] to include the issues that you think are important. There was a point when neither I nor the dean of undergraduate education was included in one of our decision-making structures, a Council of Deans. We found it very isolating and debilitating in terms of trying to do our jobs. We were unaware of what was going on in ways that were detrimental to our students and to ourselves in trying to be effective. Now, being part of the deans council discussions gives us the chance to raise the issues of values and priorities from the point of view of student affairs as part of the process of arriving at institutional decisions. So I think the first thing is to be present to raise the issues. It's not just that the issues will not necessarily be discussed the same way without you. The likelihood is, in many cases, that issues will not be raised at all.

**Nancy:** Are there other examples of the ways in which you think you can bring about discussions of values in different kinds of conversation? I'm still interested in the perception that you may all have about what is really happening in most institutions when financial issues are so pressing, and where even if one has a seat at the table and can raise different concerns, the ultimate decisions are not necessarily drawn from the frame of reference of those who are working directly with students. It is a different kind of language, almost, and so helping to bring along a shared vision or a sense of understanding of the values we are deriving from decisions becomes an exercise you cannot accomplish around a table in a meeting.

**Bobbie:** Institutions, even though they are financially strapped, are not going to stop doing new things, when all the time people are proposing new academic ventures they feel are essential to keep them on track and competitive. So, it's really a matter in student affairs of trying to make sure your new ventures are a part of the same effort to remain competitive. You know this means, in part, learning a new language, like Sheila just said, a language that I am not entirely comfortable with, that people who do the finances are more comfortable with. I think we in student affairs have difficulty demonstrating the connection between the things that we do and the actual financial outcomes, such as increasing the retention of students, or even attracting more students, or making students feel connected to their institutions.

**Nancy:** I am also struck, and I would be interested in your reaction to the role of the CSAO's relationship with the president and the ability to influence him or her—this relationship providing the basis for overcoming some of the other stumbling blocks that we've identified, whether with the financial people, or others.

**Joan:** My perspective is that you can't do it without that person's support.... It has to be mutual respect for ideas and support. I'm speculating that Jack's relationship with his president is a very positive one, because

he is taking a very risky strategy there of health promotion versus intercollegiate athletics. Now maybe that can be done in his part of the country, but you probably wouldn't do that in Indiana.

**Jack:** If you don't, you'll be affecting change only within your own area, and you won't have the kind of impact that we're discussing here on the entire institution. If we are going to be the change masters, we have to affect the entire institution.

Without a strong and positive relationship with the president, or the ability to influence the president, we'll just be making little changes in our own structure that will not be noticed by anyone else.

Even if you can't do it structurally, there are some other ways to do it. We wanted more interest on the co-curriculum several years ago, and when our student activities position became available, we hired a long-standing, part-time faculty member who was highly regarded within the academic community and someone who has always had credibility. That was a departure from the traditional requirements that we would normally seek for that position. But that person stayed for four years and has now gone back to faculty as a full-time faculty member. Over those four years, we made more of an impact on the co-curriculum and the relationship with classroom teachers in our programming than we ever could have with someone from a more traditional background. I think that is an example of making small changes if you can't make the big ones structurally.

**Sheila:** Yesterday, when I was thinking about this, I thought, "the best people I know in student affairs are opportunists." They have always got their antennae out institution-wide for any opening they can find, any door they can get a toe into at the time. I think that's a brilliant example of hiring a part-time faculty member to be the director of student activities. The people who say, "What does a director of student activities do anyway?" will all of a sudden say, "Well, if Joe Schmoe now does it, then it can't be a complete airhead's job."

**Larry:** In spite of the fact that Sheila says she is spending all of her time on budgets, my guess is that, much like Bobbie, Jack, Joan, Nancy, and myself, we define the areas we are going to make changes in and proceed intentionally. What I am hearing from this part of the discussion is, in effect, that to be a change agent, you always have to maintain that visionary piece and be ready to strike when there's an opportunity.

### *Change and the Student Affairs Staff*

**Nancy:** How does the notion of needing to be opportunistic relate to the rest of our staff? It's one thing to be the chief person with a vision, but we all supervise a variety of department people. How do you pull them into thinking with a vision or being willing to see opportunities for change?

**Bobbie:** You can't work well without people who don't have some of the same feelings. I think in student affairs, almost more than in any other area, you depend on people being exploitable, that they will be so committed to an idea or a possibility that they will be willing to do it without resources and probably out of their own hide. I think we benefit from that.

**Jack:** *Everybody* within student affairs has to be the visionary, not just the leader, because our whole role is to transmit that kind of vision through all of our staff to our students.... We need to teach [our students] how to be leaders, and that means that all of our staff, especially those of us with direct interaction with students, need to understand how to translate vision into action. If that fire has gone out of us because of all the fiscal problems we have faced, then all of us as individual practitioners within the field have to reevaluate whether our usefulness has also run out. We can't be effective in this profession without the fire, without the visions, without the larger view of things. It's our job as the leaders within the profession to keep those fires burning as much as we can.

**Bobbie:** It's an opportunity that we sometimes provide to others on our staff: to let them follow their vision compensates them for the fact that we can't give them other things—like more resources, or advancement, or space. It's an opportunity for their own growth as well as the opportunity to be an agent of change within the institution.

**Larry:** [Our focus] on organizational change has all of a sudden turned to a different topic: working with staff on personal growth and development in order to make organizational change work. It is something that in your capacity as chief student affairs officers haunts you systematically on a daily and semesterly basis—to help establish the kind of vision, help deal with the personal development of individuals, help put the values on the table, and promote individual personal growth and development.

**Jack:** It's the essence of what we need to do. We need opportunities to sit down individually with each of our staff people, whether they report directly to us or not, and that's an example of getting outside of the formal structure of things, and not discuss the day-to-day business and the day-to-day problems, but to discuss instead the values and principles which we want them to have. We want them to analyze "What values and principles are going to guide your work for the next year? How could those be translated into new sets of programs? Given those values and principles, what needs to be dropped? What needs to go in order to make room for what we really want to accomplish and achieve in this area?" I think it's important to have that discussion and that the best forum for that is with the individual staff person.

**Sheila:** I think that the chief student affairs officer can create a climate in which the leadership of change is part of everyone's responsibilities and is integrated into the culture. To acknowledge that's the way we are, that's what we do, that we always plan and evaluate and review, and that we value doing it a new way the second time around as opposed to we value getting it right, knowing it was good and sticking with it....

I think it is possible in lots of ways to create the environment that values innovation from people who don't necessarily imagine themselves to be in positions where what they are supposed to be doing is a lot of innovating. [We need to] say, "This is great. This is a wonderful orientation program; it really works in these ways. What would you like to do differently next time?"

**Larry:** You know the old saying, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Now the saying is, "If it's not broke, improve it." It seems to me that's what

you're talking about with staff, the assumption that things can always be better. Our role is to help the staff see this as the process of change, rather than Sheila's point that once you have the product, you're done. Is this a changing role?

**Jack:** When something new is tried and it doesn't work very well, in structures that just punish that kind of outcome, you will never see another innovation again. We need the attitude, "Well, we tried it, it's a little bit broken. Let's look at the broken parts, and let's see if we can fix it, and let's not chuck the whole model yet, but look at the pieces we can put back together again."

**Joan:** I think of the Coca-Cola model. When new Coke came out, nobody liked it. I don't know what happened to that person, but Coca-Cola jumped on the opportunity to bring back Classic Coke. Why not do the same thing in student affairs? Here's a New Orientation, Classic Orientation.

**Larry:** Given this kind of discussion, what can we do, and who should be doing it, to help student affairs professionals be better prepared for change, better prepared for being change masters?

**Jack:** I've done some thinking about this when I've worked with graduate students, student interns, and new professionals. One of the things that seems to be lacking in their preparation is attention to the personal aspects of preparation for the profession. Much of what we've talked about here today relates back to a personal groundedness in how individuals cope with sometimes very difficult changes. Student affairs professionals have to help students face all of the difficult issues that predominate in our day-to-day lives, such as dealing with homophobia and assisting people who are in the minority in a larger culture feel included, feel accepted, and feel a part of the larger community. How do you establish an ethic of care if you don't have the internal strengths and self-understanding to grasp the notion of caring?

I guess I'm proposing a more introspective look at the individual in the course of preparation and early on the job itself, because that's where the values come from. People need to have a well-defined sense of values and principles that they clearly articulate to themselves before they can transmit those to students, to the institutional culture, or become change agents in helping people work more interdependently.

**Bobbie:** One of the things that's happening, too, is that we talk about the ways we serve a diverse student body. We deal with societal issues, and the discussion of those topics involves much greater risks on the part of our staff. Our staff doesn't have a level of trust with one another that makes it possible for them to have truly effective, candid discussions around their own issues in those matters. One of the things we have to do is spend time developing a sense of trust and knowledge among our staff, a level that will help them to be able to address sensitive issues. They have to develop a respect for difference and a tolerance for mistakes while people learn.

I don't think that we can make use of our differences appropriately to improve how we do our jobs unless we can establish some kind of basic cooperative learning arrangement and give colleagues the freedom to make mistakes. We recently hired a consultant to talk about diversity

issues with our staff. It was a very useful time for us and made it seem strange that we had never done this before. Prior to this, many staff members had not shared their experiences, and it gave us enough common understanding to allow room for people to take risks with one another and to increase their learning.

**Joan:** That's a great example of modeling behavior that you would hope students would exhibit in the community as well. We often talk about modeling behaviors in individuals, but not often do we as a staff think of modeling the behavior as a staff having the opportunity to discuss things that are risky with one another. I often hear from students they don't feel comfortable talking to other students and what you said is your staff didn't feel comfortable either. So you provided an environment where they felt comfortable and then students can say, "Well, if the student affairs staff can do it, we can do it."

### *Advice for Implementing Change*

**Larry:** If one were going to give advice to colleagues and peers about systematically looking at institutional change and organizational change, what advice would you give them?

**Joan:** One is to involve people. Let them know the time frame. Let them know that there will or won't be any changes that will affect their job status, because whenever anybody starts talking about organizational change, people start to think: "Oh God, there goes my job," or "My job is going to be changed so much, they are going to put me in admissions when I've been in the registrar's office for years!" Let people know what's on the table, and what is not.

**Sheila:** One of the most important aspects of change is the question of timing. In the *biggest* sense, you have relatively little control over the timing. Change sort of has its own little calendar, has its own pace. You can emphasize certain things and de-emphasize other things. You can have the greatest idea in the world but if you are out of sync with the rest of the institution, it is going nowhere. To actively figure out when your notion fits into a bigger picture in the smoothest possible way is probably the most important part of preplanning change. It seems to me that you can steer, more than you can control, the pace of the change in an organization.

**Jack:** I guess a primary piece of advice I would give is to just start doing things, not necessarily with great fanfare, or emphasizing huge projects, but work in small ways with individuals who can get some changes done. We can quietly start doing things and encourage everyone around us to do things a little differently, establish a mind-set that things can be done differently and encourage that sort of thing on a day-to-day basis.

Finally, be flexible as a leader. Five years from now we may be called upon to lead and to manage in ways that we can't conceive of today....[We need to] have the flexibility to say, "Look, I'm not only a directive kind of a leader, but I can be a participative leader." While I may not prefer that, it is within my repertoire of responses to be able to lead that way.

**Larry:** One last question, how does any of this, or all of this, speak to the concerns of educational reformers who are interested in enhancing through reform?

**Bobbie:** I think that we do have something to offer to the institution as a whole, and to institutional reform as a whole. It's partly because we come from a tradition of thinking about our students both as individuals, and as members of diverse groups, and as having different needs. We believe it is appropriate to serve those needs in different ways. I think to some extent that runs counter to a lot of the educational philosophy, which assumes we teach material one way, and if the student doesn't get it, then the fault lies within the student and not with the message or the messenger. There is a lot of research that shows this is not so. Our institutions need to be able to respond in a variety of ways in order to be effective for all of the students that we have invited, recruited, and desperately want to be there. We have a responsibility to help make success possible for the students who have accepted this invitation. Student services has a greater sensitivity to the need to see students as coming to us with different developmental needs, different backgrounds and preparations, the need to teach in different ways, and the need to evaluate the success of our efforts. We are likely to believe that the role of the institution is to try to fill in the gap between where students are when they arrive and where we hope they will end up.