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## Rethinking Student Affairs Practice

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## Rethinking Student Affairs Practice

P. Love and S. Estanek

*A Review Essay by Eileen Hulme, Ph.D.*

Eileen Hulme Ph.D., Vice President for Student Life, Baylor University.

Change has become one of the culture's central organizing features in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In their book, *Rethinking Student Affairs Practice*, Patrick Love and Sandra Estanek challenge student services professionals to embrace change by expanding the mental filters and frameworks that guide their work. The authors skillfully present a conceptual schema that exhorts individuals to think differently about what they do while taking into consideration institutional constraints. The four interrelated elements they present, valuing dualisms, transcending paradigms, recognizing connectedness and embracing paradox, are offered as departures from the Newtonian worldview that has dominated both scientific inquiry and organizational behavior for decades. Subsequent sections of this thought-provoking book challenge the student affairs professional to "rethink" their current practice and move beyond their existing assumptions. Part one explores existing processes by examining leadership, intrapreneurship and assessment. Part two delves into the paradigms that shape our beliefs about obtaining and managing resources. The book concludes with an intriguing section on student affairs competencies that will shape the future of the profession.

Paradigms represent the assumptions that are made about the nature of reality. The authors suggest that a new paradigm has emerged that challenges the Newtonian assumption that the world is stable, predictable and can be controlled through objective science. The development of a new science of reality challenges student affairs professionals to consider a reordering of existing mental patterns that take into account an unstable world marked by complex systems are open and evolving. Love and Estanek suggest that dualistic thinking that divides elements into two opposites and favors one over the other should be understood and valued as part of the context of an institution. However, the authors propose that this paradigm, while accepted, can be transcended by recognizing that the divided elements are not discrete, but rather exist in "orbit about one another." (pg. 17) Life is viewed as fundamentally interdependent, collaborative and related. Paradox is another form of understanding the relationship of opposing elements. This relationship suggests that opposites can simultaneously exist together. The book provides specific examples of how each of these elements relate to student affairs work.

While challenging student affairs practitioners to examine their basic worldview, Love and Stanek also present a compelling argument for examination of our existing processes including leadership and assessment. The authors recognize the critical importance of leadership that is distributed through the entire organization. Pervasive leadership results in strong relationships and adoption of an ethos of organizational learning. It ultimately results in substantive and transformative change by building on the shared passions of the organizational members. This type of leadership in action results in what the authors

term "intrapreneurship." Intrapreneurship challenges existing assumptions, embraces possibilities and lives in the future. This type of leadership is infused with what Love and Estanek term an assessment mindset. This suggests that assessment is a continual process of learning which produces evidence to improve practice. An assessment mindset is cultivated in an individual by encouraging a reflective practice that creates the future and diffuses the past.

Diminishing resources has become a central management challenge for student affairs administrators. The authors use the concepts of pervasive leadership and intrapreneurship to address resources from a more proactive and creative mindset. They challenge professionals not to see themselves as victims of fewer resources, but rather individuals who can leverage a variety of resources in new and imaginative ways. Technology is also addressed as a resource to be embraced and not shunned. The duality of either being a person with technological prowess or a person with strong people skills is challenged. Professionals are encouraged to be active participants in the shaping of technology on college campuses.

The final section of the book is devoted to the emerging future of the field of student affairs and argues that professionals working in the field must be about intentionally creating and influencing that future. This new future must embrace a global perspective and realize higher education's responsibility to educate citizens prepared to thrive in a multicultural society. Scenario planning and futures forecasting provide techniques to help individuals and student affairs staffs consider the range of possible scenarios and to engage in collaborative dialogue to influence the inherently unpredictable future.

The strength of this book lies in its attempt to inspire the creation of new ways to view student affairs by challenging the type of thinking that limits creative thought and by proposing a fresh rethinking of our current structures. However, from a Christian worldview perspective, the book is valid yet incomplete. The following paragraphs will critique the four elements of Love and Estanek's conceptual schema, i.e., valuing dualisms, transcending paradigms, recognizing connectedness and embracing paradox using related scriptures. This critique is not intended to serve the purpose of an in-depth theological exposition of each concept but rather to present an expanded perspective for continual reflective thought.

*Rethinking Student Affairs Practice* is fundamentally about thinking differently about student affairs practice. It brings to light processes and resources that need to be reexamined. Thinking differently and bringing about change are inherent in Christian thought. Romans 12:2 states: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect." And the very essence of Christianity is to be fundamentally changed by a life-altering relationship with the Son of God. Therefore, the challenge to think differently and to allow yourself to be continually changed is well within Christian thought. However, the motivation to think differently and to live lives open to change may be fundamentally different. Christians are challenged to renew their minds not as a means of being more culturally relevant or to compete in a fast-paced, ever changing society. Their challenge to change comes from a deep desire to please a loving, compassionate, righteous God. The change may appear in its outward vestiges as similar but the motivational attitude that drives the action and ultimately the outcome is drastically different.

Understanding the connectedness of the world is also sympathetic with Christian thought. Romans 8:28 states that “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, and are called according to His purpose.” The fact that all things work together addresses the type of connectedness that Love and Estanek speak of in their book. The very essence of the concept of the body found in I Corinthians 12 suggests an interdependence among people that is often not found in our highly competitive, self-oriented world. Love and Estanek’s encouragement to understand that the universe is not understood by dividing and controlling singular elements but rather by a systemic, holistic view of life is clearly within a Christian worldview. But again, the concept is not complete without a serious consideration of the unforeseen forces that create and maintain this cohesive connected universe. Christians would assert that the essence of God is central to recognizing and embracing connectedness.

And finally, embracing paradox is at the heart of the New Testament. We are called to love our enemies. We are created in the image of God yet have the capacity for sin. Influential leaders in the New Testament were also influential persecutors of the faith. However, for the Christian to embrace paradox does not imply that we non-critically move to the center between the two divergent points of view. This may simply create an amoral relativism that does not create positive change. Yet, at the same time paradox should not force us into an entrenched dualistic perspective on life that limits God. The challenge of embracing the paradox is to understand our great and abiding need for God. This book is a valuable tool for challenging our existing paradigms and moving us toward the renewing of our minds.