

PROVISIONAL SELVES, REVOLVING TEAMS, AND TEMPORARY WORKSPACES

Emelia Dunston

Vanderbilt University, Peabody College

Abstract

When you look at the division of staff responsibilities among student affairs units at most midsize to large institutions, you will see that many professionals have adopted a specialist persona. In response to diversifying student populations, campuses designed roles to deal with the specialized issues and concerns presented by the students arriving on campus. As functional units expanded and became more specialized, so did the positions created. If a unit is large enough, the overlap of roles and responsibilities does not occur, leading to the creation of functional silos. Silos perpetuate isolation, discourage collaboration, and make advancement difficult for professionals. To help our field combat this problem, we need to structure our units to develop professionals into generalists. Blending concepts developed by Ancona & Bresman (2007) and Petriglieri, Petriglieri, & Wood (2017), this paper proposes a new workplace model for student affairs professionals that encourages the formation of portable selves and temporary workspaces.

During the first year of my master's program, I read *Where You Work Matters* by Joan Hirt, which identified the different types of student affairs professionals that correlate with specific institution types. These types ranged from the guardians at Historically Black Colleges and Universities to the specialists at Research Universities (Hirt, 2006). Based on her observations of student affairs professionals working at liberal arts colleges, Hirt (2006) characterized their method of practice as the standard bearers, or generalists. She found these professionals wore several hats, were knowledgeable about multiple functional areas, and were able to handle an assortment of situations. Today, it seems that more student affairs professionals have adopted a specialist persona. This is by no fault of their own; rather, it is an inadvertent consequence of the organizational structures commonly used among student affairs divisions.

A greater emphasis on specialization arose following World War II because of rapidly expanding student populations (Thelin, 2004; Tull & Kuk, 2012). In response, campuses created new roles to address the specialized issues and concerns presented by these students (Kuk, 2009; Tull & Kuk, 2012). As functional units expanded and became more specialized, the positions created began to reflect this new organizational model (Kuk, 2009; Thelin, 2004; Tull & Kuk, 2012). If a division is large enough, the overlap of roles and responsibilities does not occur, leading to the creation of functional silos (Kuk, 2009). In functional silos, "units perform their functions and services as discrete entities" (Kuk, 2009, p. 324). Silos lead to individuals working in isolation, discourage collaboration, and make it challenging for professionals to position themselves for advancement. To help our field combat this problem, we have to become more comfortable with mobility, fluidity, and uncertainty. Student affairs professionals should be knowledgeable in multiple areas and equipped with an abundance of transferable skills and direct experience that can be applied in numerous environments.

We need to structure our work environments in a manner that develops professionals into generalists. Hirt (2006) found that these professionals were given the agency to do the work their way, gain significant first-hand experience, and grow their professional capacities. This professional type matches well with the concept of crafting portable selves. Petriglieri, Petriglieri, and Wood (2017) define portable selves as "selves endowed with definitions, motives, and abilities that can be deployed across roles and organizations over time" (Petriglieri et al., 2017, p. 14). Crafting more fluid versions of ourselves would help professionals stop viewing their work as a source of self-definition, build greater resiliency, and temper some of the conflicts that result when organizations try to enact change (Petriglieri et al., 2017). Individuals should be pushed to experiment rather than seek specialization (Ibarra, 2015; Petriglieri et al., 2017).

Sandeen (1998, as cited in Evans & Ranero, 2009) shared concerns about increased specialization threatening the strength of the profession. He believed "specialization contributes to professional isolation" and suggested that upward mobility would become more difficult for professionals because they are no longer viewed as generalists but as experts in a specific functional area (Evans & Ranero, 2009, p. 215). Specialization can lead individuals into what author Herminia Ibarra (2015) coined as the competency trap. According to Ibarra (2015), when we reach a level of mastery with our abilities, it deepens our satisfaction and self-efficacy. However, continuing to refine a narrow set of skills and competencies can cause individuals to limit themselves. Rather than expanding our capabilities, we propel ourselves further into the trap Ibarra described. In order to protect new professionals from falling victim to the competency trap, Ibarra (2015) recommends the adoption of a playful attitude. A playful attitude gives an individual permission to try something new—to experiment with different identities and

behaviors—without penalty. Individuals have to act first and think later in order to find their authentic selves (Ibarra, 2015; Petriglieri et al., 2017).

Popular opinion seems to suggest that current professionals, particularly millennials, are not seeking to follow the same career trajectories commonly followed by earlier generations (Landrum, 2017; MacNeish, 2019; Petriglieri et al., 2017). Contemporary careers, a term suggested for use by Arthur and Rousseau (1996, as cited in Petriglieri et al., 2017), are defined by “mobility, uncertainty, and individual agency” (Petriglieri et al., 2017, p. 4). Instead of convincing professionals to conform to the traditional standards normalized within student affairs, we need to convert our work environments into temporary identity workspaces. These are “institutions that host members temporarily yet promise to transform them permanently” (Petriglieri et al., 2017, p. 2). These spaces, similar to those endorsed by Ancona and Bresman (2007) and Ibarra (2015), create an atmosphere of psychological safety and reflection that gives individuals permission to play, explore, and reflect. Evidence of the impact of psychological safety on teams and individuals has been widely reported by multiple researchers. It is associated with high levels of proactive behaviors, creativity, exploration, experimentation and increased trust (Ancona & Bresman, 2007; Grant & Parker, 2009). Additionally, these spaces are designed for individuals to move and shift their focus and composition as circumstances and tasks change (Ancona & Bresman, 2007). If we structured our environments in a way that encouraged this type of mobility, it would help us avoid stagnancy within our work and elicit more innovation.

Though moving around in this profession is seen as a necessity for career progression and advancement, the practice of job-hopping is seen as a negative (Landrum, 2017; MacNeish, 2019). When applicants are evaluated for positions, ones who have stayed in positions for a small number of years are often discounted. The bouncing around is perceived as a lack of commitment, leading hiring committees to question whether or not a person will make an investment in their institution (Landrum, 2017). Outside of higher education, more favorable attitudes towards job-hopping are developing. A CareerBuilder survey of employers from 2014 found that 45% of employers surveyed expected younger employees to stay with their organizations no more than two years. 27% expected new grads to stay five years or more (CareerBuilder, 2014, as cited in Rivers, 2018). More recently, a Robert Half survey reported that 57% of respondents stated that the stigma associated with job-hopping is losing ground when it comes to influencing an applicant’s candidacy (Landrum, 2017). It is now seen as an inevitable move for those looking for further development and career mobility (Landrum, 2017; MacNeish, 2019; Mueller & Price, 1990). Student affairs leaders should help remove the negative stigma associated with employee turnover and encourage more movement. Rather than trying to be an individual’s final stop on their career journey, we need to be comfortable with being one of many. Our primary goal should be to produce and develop. Having employees view their time in each role or position as temporary could motivate individuals to make the most of their limited time. A focused view of the work could provide direction and intentionality to their efforts, strengthen their self-efficacy, increase the task significance of their efforts, reduce individuals’ adverseness to change, and encourage the development of more fulfilling inner work lives (Amabile & Kramer, 2011; Petriglieri et al., 2017). We want professionals to acquire an affinity to our organizations that stimulates a desire to do quality work but is not constricting. Professionals should walk away from each role better than when they started, personally and professionally, and not feel guilty about moving on when it is time.

Evidence has shown that frequent staff turnover can be disruptive, making it difficult for offices to maintain a consistent level of service (Rosser & Javinar, 2003). However, it is often

the consequence of poorly designed institutional structures that limit an employee's ability to grow internally (Jo, 2008). Once the work becomes stagnant and additional opportunities for growth diminish, it makes sense that an individual would want to move on. The problem is, we are losing talented professionals before they reach that point. Leadership in higher education does not have to operate in this manner. Rather than continuing to preserve the current model, we need to evolve. The new model proposed would be a major shift from what has traditionally been done. Yet, it has the potential to further our longevity as a profession and help us recruit new talent to consider higher education or student affairs as a worthwhile career path. The turnover proposed in this model would not hold the same negative connotations as current occurrences. Instead, the turnover would be expected, allowing units time to strategize and facilitate a seamless transition without disrupting operations.

References

- Amabile, T. & Kramer, S. (2011). *The progress principle: Using small wins to ignite joy, engagement, and creativity at work*. Harvard Business School Press.
- Ancona, D., & Bresman, H. (2007). *X-teams: How to build teams that lead, innovate, and succeed*. Harvard Business School Press.
- Evans, N. & Ranero, J. (2009). Professional associations in student affairs. In G. S. McClellan, J. Stringer, & Associates (Eds.), *Handbook of student affairs administration* (pp. 206–221). Jossey-Bass.
- Grant, A., & Parker, S. (2009). Redesigning work design theories: The rise of relational and proactive perspectives. *The Academy of Management*, 3(1), 317-375.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19416520903047327>
- Grant, A. & Shin, J. (2011). Work motivation: Directing, energizing, and maintaining effort (and research). In R.M. Ryan (Ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Motivation*. Oxford University Press.
- Hirt, J. B. (2006). *Where you work matters: Student affairs administration at different types of institutions*. University Press of America.
- Ibarra, H. (2015). *Act like a leader, think like a leader*. Harvard Business School Press.
- Jo, V. (2008). Voluntary turnover and women administrators in higher education. *Higher Education*. 56(5), 565–582.
- Kuk, L. (2009). The dynamics of organizational models within student affairs. In G. S. McClellan, J. Stringer, & Associates (Eds.), *Handbook of student affairs administration* (pp. 313–332). Jossey-Bass.
- Landrum, S. (2017, November 10). Millennials aren't afraid to change jobs, And here's why. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sarahlandrum/2017/11/10/millennials-arent-afraid-to-change-jobs-and-heres-why/#2dd1588819a5>
- Lewis, C. (2015). What is improvement science? Do we need it in education?. *Educational Researcher*, 44(1), 54-61. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X15570388>
- MacNeish, L. (2019, April 10). Stop apologizing for job-hopping. *Medium*.

- <https://medium.com/the-ascent/stop-apologizing-for-job-hopping-bc5943c4b511>
- Mueller, C & Price, J. (1990). Economic, psychological, and sociological determinants of voluntary turnover. *Journal of Behavioral Economics*, 19(3), 321-336.
- Petriglieri, G., Petriglieri, J. L., & Wood, J. D. (2017). Fast tracks and inner journeys: Crafting portable selves for contemporary careers. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 63(3), 479-525.
- Rivers, D. L. (2018). *A grounded theory of millennials job-hopping* [Doctoral dissertation]. <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations/5936/>
- Rosser, V. J., & Javinar, J. M. (2003). Midlevel student affairs leaders' intentions to leave: Examining the quality of their professional and institutional work life. *Journal of College Student Development*, 44(6), 813-830. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2003.0076>
- Sandeen, A. (1998). Creeping specialization in student affairs. *About Campus*, 3(2), 2-3.
- Thelin, J. R. (2004). *A history of American higher education*. JHU Press.
- Tull, A., & Kuk, L. (Eds.). (2012). *New realities in the management of student affairs: Emerging specialist roles and structures for changing times*. Stylus Publishing, LLC.