

# INTRODUCTION: OUT OF THE BLUE

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*I've looked at clouds from both sides now,  
From up and down, and still somehow,  
It's cloud illusions I recall;  
I really don't know clouds at all.*

JONI MITCHELL



In my twenty-three years in the student affairs profession, I have witnessed all kinds of change and uncertainty. I've witnessed the onset of technology in every aspect of the field. I've experienced the growing diversity of our profession and our students. I've been exposed to new paradigms of leadership, management, and communication. I've had the opportunity to learn from the masters of our profession, and to teach some of our profession's future leaders.

Until recently, I imagined that my exposure to changes of this magnitude had prepared me to respond to just about anything that might happen in the student affairs field. Yet nothing prepared me for the events of September 11, 2001. All these months later, I'm still trying to find my footing.

Late in the afternoon of a clear October day, roughly one month after the terrorist attacks in New York City, Washington, D.C., and rural Pennsylvania, I was preparing for an overnight retreat with the staff

from our student affairs division here at James Madison University. An overnight trip to Graves Mountain Inn in rural Virginia seemed like an ideal opportunity to regroup and refocus. My wife Deb picked me up early from work so that I could get ready for the trip.

But when I got to the car, Deb explained that my father had suffered a stroke and was in a coma in the Grand Island, Nebraska, hospital. And the prognosis wasn't good.

By then I should have learned: Life has a way of throwing curve balls when we're expecting fastballs or sliders. I'd have to miss the student affairs retreat; I needed to be in the middle of Nebraska.

Getting to Nebraska from Virginia was not an easy task; the Washington, D.C., airports were still in disarray. Baltimore was my best alternative. Leaving behind a Palm Pilot full of student affairs priorities, and with my wife at the wheel of our car, we headed for Baltimore, thinking about our changing roles as caretakers of the generations before and after us in a world gone crazy. It was too dark to see the scenery of the Shenandoah Valley, Harper's Ferry, and the rolling hillsides of western Maryland through which we passed. For all we knew, we could have been flying through clouds.

The jet from Baltimore to Minneapolis was half full, primarily because the airline industry was still in a state of shock. I transferred to a propeller plane for the Lincoln flight, found my window seat, and settled in for what was to be a turbulent ride.

***Turbulence.***

*Turbulence* describes difficult flight conditions. Experiencing turbulence is a given on most flights; aircraft are equipped with seatbelts, radar, and other forms of technology to anticipate and respond to turbulence. Crewmembers are trained to react to turbulence in a relaxed, professional manner; their response is intended to have a calming effect on the passengers.

The turbulence on this particular flight occurred while the plane ascended and descended through cloud layers. I don't know exactly

why the clouds cause turbulence. I can only assume it has something to do with the differing weight and density between “clear” and “cloudy” air. Through the window, I saw only a changing spectrum of white and gray.

Flying through clouds can be unpleasant because you’re not sure what else is out there. Another plane? A high-flying flock of geese? Angels? Anything is possible when nothing is visible.

The flight became a metaphor for my personal circumstances; I was flying through clouds, literally and figuratively. I had no idea what I’d find at the end of my flight. A simple trip across the nation was no longer simple. Relatives had been called up for active duty and would soon be headed for Kuwait. My state’s budget picture was shaky, putting my organization and staff at risk. I thought of a generally unflappable colleague who had recently broken down in tears in my office saying, “I just don’t know what I’m supposed to do anymore.”

We’re all flying through clouds.

The plane landed safely. At the hospital, I saw my brother and sister in the hallway outside my father’s room, laughing; I’d expected to find them in tears. Turns out the old soldier had miraculously come out of his coma and was recovering from pneumonia—a turn of events that no one had expected.

Dad improved dramatically over the next few days. I returned to Virginia knowing that my father was still very ill, but that the danger was over for the time being. For a short while, the clouds cleared and the turbulence dissipated.

But I knew the turbulence could come back.

### ***Navigating Uncertainty and Change.***

*Confusion. Commotion. Instability. Disorder. Chaos.* These are all synonyms for turbulence. I believe turbulence is an effect of the uncertainty and change we’re increasingly experiencing in the student affairs profession. Our field has focused on change and change management in recent years. We’re keenly aware that change causes turbulence and

that it must be managed, but we continue to act as if we're somehow in control of the changes affecting our profession. While we can and often do generate change and transformation, we're not capable of anticipating all of the forces of change. We simply don't know what might happen next in our world, on our campuses, in our offices, and in our own lives.

***The Flight Manual.***

Today, change management is necessary but not adequate to address the turbulence of our work lives. We in the student affairs profession must now develop new skills, knowledge, and competencies to help our campuses navigate uncertainty and change.

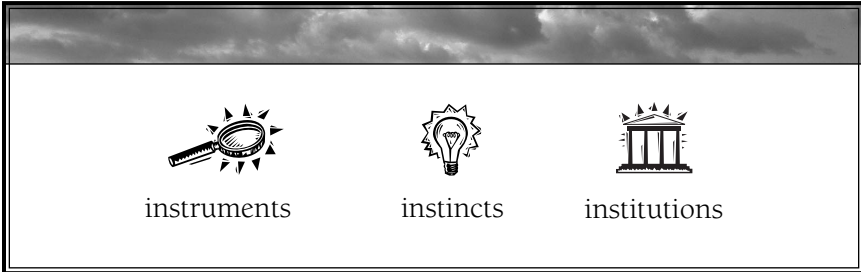
During my flight from Minneapolis to Lincoln, I realized that the flight crew was remaining calm and composed despite the turbulence. They understood the conditions we were experiencing, they knew how to respond to those conditions, and they demonstrated poise under pressure. If they'd behaved differently, we passengers would have responded with panic.

Like well-equipped and well-trained flight crews, we in student affairs need to use our instruments, our instincts, and our institutions to make it through the inevitable turbulence until we reach clearer, calmer skies.

This book is intended for the full range of student affairs passengers. If you're a seasoned professional engaged in organizational leadership, this book will give you added insight as you look for new and better ways to fly *united*. If you're a middle manager, this book will help you develop the competencies you need to get you through the *deltas* of uncertainty. If you're a new professional, this book will introduce you to the *friendly skies* of student affairs. And if you're a graduate student or prospective professional, this book may help you gain a few more hours of instruction on the profession before you attempt to fly solo.

Like its earlier companion volumes—*Fables, Labels, and Folding Tables: Reflections on the Student Affairs Profession* (Atwood Publishing 1999), and *Listen Very Loud: Paying Attention in the Student Affairs Profession* (Atwood Publishing 2001)—*Flying Through Clouds* focuses on the

philosophical foundations of a profession in transition. To plot a reliable course through uncertainty and change in this field, we as student affairs professionals must be capable of effectively using three navigational resources: our instruments, our instincts, and our institutions. These resources will be periodically identified in the essays with the following icons:



*Instruments.* You’ve probably seen movies in which pilots or crewmembers have to fly a plane “on instruments” when they have little or no visibility and they can’t see what’s out there. In student affairs, we too must occasionally fly on instruments when we’re not sure what’s out there. Our instruments include technology, theories and methodologies, physical facilities, and the resources we use to achieve our goals. Although we’re occasionally asked—or required—to fly on instruments alone, we generally use our instruments in conjunction with our *instincts* and *institutions*.

*Instincts.* Our instincts are our adaptive behaviors. An effective pilot can use his or her intuition and intrinsic abilities to make quick decisions in difficult circumstances. In student affairs, we must also rely on the innate aspects of our behavior including our intuition, feelings, character, and senses. We must constantly measure our instincts against the outcomes we achieve, and we must frequently use our instincts concurrently with our instruments and our institutions.

*Institutions.* Our institutions are the organized bodies of people we work with. For pilots, institutions might include the airlines they work for and the flight crews they work with. Without these institutions,

pilots can't accomplish their tasks. Our student affairs institutions are made up of the people with whom we collaborate, allocate resources, engage in mutual support, and share any other interactions that will help us build effective relationships to achieve organizational success.

### ***The Flight Plan.***

Finding your way through uncertainty and change in the student affairs profession requires you to attend to and then integrate your navigational resources. That's why each essay in this book offers perceptions and perspectives on the contemporary issues facing our field. By reading this book and considering the many questions it poses for personal reflection and group discussion, you'll have the opportunity to:

- Use your instruments, instincts, and institutions to navigate changing circumstances.
- Understand the relationships between choices and consequences.
- Respond to parental concerns and perceptions about the college experience.
- Address unforeseen circumstances as opportunities rather than threats.
- Improve staff performance, simplify departmental processes, and create facilities better equipped to provide student affairs services.
- Redefine the role of student affairs in retention, progression, and graduation.
- Transform lessons from your past into a foundation on which to build your career.
- Find indications of hope, growth, and resilience on your campus.
- Practice critical thinking to overcome narrowly viewed assessments of "The Truth."
- Help your students, your colleagues, and yourself get the most out of life and work by focusing on the present.
- Distinguish between the acquisition of knowledge and the development of wisdom in higher education.

- Create environments that are intentionally inviting to students and nurturing for you and your colleagues.
- Become acquainted with the pioneers and pilgrims of the student affairs profession, and carry their legacy forward.
- Learn how to practice patience, how to change the way you look at uncertainty, how to respond to difficult or confusing situations, and how to model trustworthiness.

Before the advent of digital entertainment, I enjoyed the flexibility of selecting a music station suitable to my own tastes via an aircraft's built-in music system. Plugging the earphone "sound tubes" into the armrest of my seat, I could listen to comedy, news, Top 40, oldies, country, or classical; it was up to me to decide. The same is true for this book. You get to decide where to start. Pick a chapter that addresses a particular item of concern if you'd like, or just start at the beginning. Find a question in the "Table of Context" (in the back of the book) that piques your interest and read the associated chapter. Flip through these pages until a title, an expression, a song quote, or an icon catches your attention. It's up to you to decide.

Although the essays here are based on my own experiences and reflections, it's my intention that your own experiences and reflections will come to life as you read. Each essay ends with three questions for discussion or reflection; I hope additional questions will emerge from your reading.

In our personal and professional lives, flying through clouds can be exhilarating as well as alarming. Like well-equipped flight crews, we can use our instruments, our instincts, and our institutions to successfully navigate to clearer skies. Use this book as one of your instruments in planning, training, and presenting as you work with the students, faculty, staff, parents, and other passengers you're bound to meet on your journey.

R.L.M.

P.S.: I don't carry a sky pager, but I am interested in your comments, suggestions, and reflections. Please share them with me at *mitcherl@jmu.edu*.

## REFLECTION

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1. What are some of the instruments (technologies, theories, methodologies, facilities, resources) that are critical to your success in student affairs? What instruments are you lacking?
2. How do you measure your instincts (innate aspects of behavior including our intuition, feelings, character, and senses) against the outcomes you achieve?
3. List the key people from your institution with whom you collaborate, share resources, and engage in mutual support. What makes these relationships mutually effective, and how do these relationships contribute to organizational success?