

# Chaos, Change, and Disruption in Higher Education: Are We Ready to Respond?

In the course of daily faculty work—whether teaching, prepping for classroom and clinical teaching, learning new teaching methodologies, engaging with students, participating in committee and project work, keeping up with knowledge advancement, conducting research, writing for publication, or collaborating with cross-disciplinary colleagues—it may seem there is little time for staying current with important happenings in the larger world of higher education, of which nursing education is a key part. How many nurse educators carve out time to regularly read or think about the larger driving trends, opportunities, and challenges in the higher education enterprise? I suspect not many, or at least not a majority. Yet, these issues hold significant meaning for nursing education, now and for the future.

Pertinent studies and reports aimed at the nursing community from such organizations as the Institute of Medicine, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, and the National League for Nursing clearly are influencing our field, as evidenced by citations in the many manuscripts we receive for review and in articles published in the wider nursing literature. Yet, rarely are studies and reports cited that address the macro issues and trends in higher education. Reports and recommendations aimed at the general higher education community from higher education and policy organizations such as the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Education, the American Council on Education, the Lumina Foundation, the Center for the Study of Higher Education, the National Survey of Student Engagement, and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, among oth-

ers, also hold great relevance for the nursing education enterprise. We cannot afford to wear blinders that keep us from learning about and incorporating the analyses and recommendations from the general higher education academy that have relevance for our own teaching, research, institutional service, community, and policy work.

Among today's most pressing issues are the ongoing demographic shifts in population diversity and growing generational differences (<http://www.aacu.org/resources/diversity-equity-and-inclusive-excellence>; Mattie, 2014), college affordability and student loan indebtedness (Mattie, 2014), resource scarcity (Mattie, 2014), regulatory compliance and risk management (<http://www.chronicle.com/article/Risk-Managing-or-Risk-Averse-/149889/>; American Governing Boards of Colleges and Universities [AGB], 2014), the Campus SaVE Act mandating sexual assault awareness and prevention programs (<http://www.campusaveact.org>), urbanization and globalization (Mattie, 2014), and continued technological innovation (<http://www.educause.edu>; Mattie, 2014), all of which have direct implications for nursing education.

To what extent are nurse educators familiar with and well versed on these issues? What can we anticipate the impact will be on our own schools and programs? What are the factors that will influence each institution's readiness or vulnerability in responding to these trends, which will necessarily vary by institutional mission, size (student enrollment), and type (public or private, Carnegie classification); geographic location (urban or rural); size of operational budget and en-

dowment; risk management plan; leadership; faculty governance; and board governance? What innovative changes and improvements are occurring in anticipation of or response to disruptive forces?

The *Journal of Nursing Education* welcomes manuscripts that address the impact of these social, economic, policy, regulatory, and technological issues across all sectors of nursing education—public and private institutions; urban and rural schools; associate degree to graduate programs; faculty, students, and administrators; and teaching, research, and community engagement. These turbulent times in higher education, as well as in health care, call for us to raise our awareness of the transformational and often unsettling shifts that are occurring and their relevance for nursing education and nurse educators, today and going forward.

Twenty-five years ago, Peter Vaill (1989) wrote about the world being a place of chaotic change, labeling the times as “permanent white water” (p. 2). Substituting “nurse educators” for “managers” in the passage below, I posit that we still find ourselves confused, uncertain, and even frightened and deluded by the permanent white water world in which we live:

Most managers are taught to think of themselves as paddling their canoes on calm, still lakes. . . . They're led to believe that they should be pretty much able to go where they want, when they want, using means that are under their control. Sure there will be temporary disruptions during changes of various sorts—periods when they'll have to shoot the rapids in their canoes—but the disruptions will be temporary, and when things settle back down, they'll be back in the calm,

still-lake mode. But it has been my experience...that you never get out of the rapids.... The feeling is one of continuous upset and chaos. (Vaill, 1989, p. 2)

Khator (2014) identified four attitudes that often get in the way of coping with and effectively managing the “continuous upset and chaos,” aka “white water,” of higher education (pp. 4.2-4.3):

- Ignorance—“When did that happen?”—based on the belief that things are moving too fast and are too complicated for us to manage.
- Arrogance—“We have been doing this our way a long time and we know best,”—only we don’t know best and probably can’t know or anticipate disruption until faced directly with it.
- Victimization—“Why are they doing this to us?”—while the disruptions are real they are not personal, and perspective-taking is needed.
- Panic—“We have to do something? Anything! And quickly!”—urging us to “keep calm” and, dare I say, carry on.

Khator (2014) closed by stating:

No one is entirely sure what these changes will be and what they will

bring. But one thing feels certain—higher education tomorrow will not look like it does today. As educators and leaders, we have an obligation to be as effective as we can be right now, but we have an even greater responsibility to look ahead and be prepared. (pp. 4.3-4.4)

Because of the continued strong demand for admission to nursing education programs, whereas demand for many other majors is declining, the high employment levels of nursing graduates compared with other college graduates, and the competition for nurse faculty in a time of shortage when other fields have a greater supply than available openings, we have been largely insulated from the criticisms launched by elected officials and the public about value, cost, and employability issues related to a college education. Yet, nursing education programs and nurse educators are and will be—sooner or later—affected by many of these current megatrends sweeping higher education, and we must try to anticipate them, manage them, and adapt to them as they occur. As nurse educators, we have a responsibility to educate ourselves about

these macro trends and issues. We cannot continue to assume that we are immune to the disruptive and transformational forces that are affecting so many sectors of the higher education enterprise.

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**Janis P. Bellack, PhD, RN, FAAN**  
Editor

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