Students today are facing a level of complexity in their lives that was unknown to their predecessors of even a few years ago—and their behavior is showing it. The author reports on a recent effort to understand better the special stresses students now feel, and explains what faculty and staff together can do to make their campuses more responsive to students’ needs.

Not long ago, several professional colleagues and I were discussing our sense of uncertainty about what was happening with college students. We had been noticing troubling student behaviors that seemed more intense and frequent than they had a few years ago—complaints of stress, binge drinking, violent outbursts, thoughts of suicide, and a malaise of indifference and uncertainty. In spite of daily contact with students and their problems, we were feeling the uneasiness of the generation gap and were curious to get closer to what it is like to experience student life from “inside their skins.”

This discussion among a diverse group of student affairs staff led to a commitment to explore student culture beyond the routine interactions of the office or classroom. Our goals for this exploration process were twofold: first, to determine underlying motives and feelings, and then to engage in candid conversations with groups of students in which they could discuss and illustrate their experience. As a result, the first stage of our exploration was a projective data-gathering process in which sixty students told creative stories in response to ambiguous scenes. The analysis of these stories generated a series of assertions about their desires, concerns, anticipations, and uncertainties. In the second stage, these reflections were used as impetus for a series of selected classroom and discussion groups. The following observations about students and their lives today are a result of these discussions and of subsequent interactions with students in both classroom and counseling sessions.

Observation 1. “Melrose Place,” or “Ozzie and Harriet?” Finding a social connection is an overriding and sometimes confusing concern of student life.

Student reactions to this need included references to loneliness, wanting to fit in and find friends, dealing
with conflicts, and managing differences. One student surmised that half of his time in his first year was consumed with trying to find companions: “It’s hard to make friends in a large chemistry lecture when you’re sitting next to a different person every day.” A young woman in her senior year lamented that the “dating game had disappeared” and wistfully indicated that no longer is there a process of holding hands, kissing at the door, and getting to know someone over time; instead, there is pressure to “have a magic moment”—and the next thing you know, you wake up having been intimate with a stranger.

A new form of intimacy is meeting someone on the “Net.” Two students described disappointing experiences of getting airline tickets to meet a “chat room” encounter that fizzled in real life. Another example was roommates who had an argument via e-mail because they felt uneasy talking with each other face-to-face. Connecting cyberspace and intimacy has proven to be no easy matter.

Many students still had the traditional dream of a family that includes kids, a home, and a loving partner. Some students lamented that they had no idea how a relationship could be maintained, explaining that their parents were not models. One student said, “My mother’s warning was not to make the same mistakes that she did.” More than half of our students come from nontraditional backgrounds that included living with single parents, merged families, or same-sex parents. Students described a new social order in which the old models and values did not seem to fit. Although wistful for a significant life relationship, they were without a blueprint.

Observation 2. Life is like channel surfing: hundreds of choices and only seconds to decide.

Students are experiencing a proliferation of decisions, including the choice of career, lifestyle, living location, and more. Even when posing a tentative future direction, they feel a lot of uncertainty, sometimes even fear, about exploring or disclosing options, or making a choice that could prove wrong. One student sounded his personal alarm by saying, “Right now I am trying to graduate in five years, and get a good job... but who knows, I could have a 3.5 GPA, belong to ten clubs, have a great résumé, and still end up working in a grocery store or restaurant.”

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Students realize that the world is changing, and the predictability of these changes cannot easily be forecast. The stock market crashes in Hong Kong and the New York Exchange immediately reacts. An international incident occurs, and within seconds CNN beams an on-site report. Uncertainty breeds anxiety, and anxiety leads to an almost desperate attempt to find the “good life,” which sometimes holds little more than the appearance of success. The thin line that exists between success and desperation is illustrated by a coed who succeeded as a scholar with a near-perfect GPA, as a sorority officer, as a runner-up in a beauty pageant, and as a sure bet for a prestigious graduate scholar program. She was an apparent star, but she revealed to a counselor that below the surface was an overwhelming sense of uncertainty about herself, an unhappiness about her lack of meaningful relationships, a desire for even a weekend to relax, and a chronic eating disorder.

Observation 3. Students are experiencing an emotional roller coaster with intermittent periods of pressure followed by moments of escape and relief.

Worries, deadlines, and decisions constantly press on students’ emotional and physical states. They identified “escapes” such as going to work or “getting blitzed on a Friday night” as ways to get their minds off the demands of school. A teaching assistant observed that many students “just sleep” as a way to elude pressures temporarily. Some students believed they had constructive ways to manage stress, by exercising, talking to friends, or playing video games.

More flagrant manifestations of stress are the angry outbursts, antagonisms, abusive behaviors, and other confrontations that have been occurring on campus. In the last year alone, staff from a half-dozen offices have asked for training to deal with belligerent or angry students, who were considered rare ten years ago. Recently a student complaining of her frustration with the “runaround” said that she understood why students are “going postal.” Violence, shootings, and deaths are realities that have caused nearly every campus to devise a disaster plan.

Stress and its physiological symptoms, such as headaches, insomnia, gastrointestinal problems, and weakened immune systems, were once thought to be manifestations of the middle-aged corporate world but are now the most prevalent complaints of students seeking service in our counseling center. Indeed, the emotional components of irritation, frustration, and anger are rampant.

Observation 4. Students look toward the surrounding world with an attitude of wariness and a need to look out for oneself.

Students communicated a feeling that they must make it in an environment that, they concluded, was most often neutral but could also have negative, even hostile, elements; and if they were lucky they could find sources of positive support and influence. They cited the sense of danger they experienced having to go through metal detectors at their high school homecoming activities. They also cited the impact of indifference when they were labeled as a number in large classes where instructors would not notice if they were absent.

Isolation and disconnection from support are problems for many students, as evidenced when I debriefed a group of residents after a student’s suicide. The residents related an overwhelming sense of guilt for having known little about the student, who “was a quiet guy who lived in the corner room.” Few residents could even remember speaking to him, let alone knowing what was going on inside his head that would lead to suicide.

Students recognized that if they really needed support—from a tutor, a counselor, an advocate—people

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who could help them were out there somewhere, but they would have to seek them out. The campus today has more rules and regulations than ever before to protect the rights of students, more student services with highly trained licensed or certified staff, more advocates to assist the needs of special populations, and more stringent federal mandates to accommodate those with identified disabilities. However, many students describe themselves as embarrassed to seek these services and as feeling a sense of failure about needing them. Other students feel that such services seem formal, bureaucratic, and in many ways insensitive. Still other students have picked up on a consumer rights mentality and assume a "demanding and confrontive stance in approaching a campus resource.

In our counseling service, we have increased the number of informed consents and caveats, and we act with more caution than at any time in the past so as not to violate an ethical or legal standard. It seems that as the campus has codified procedures to protect and help the individual, we have also created practices that are sterile and insulated from the genuine human encounter. Our attempt to control, regulate, guarantee, and protect human rights has somehow denied the very essence of being helpful, which is an attitude of genuineness, caring, and respect.

Observation 5. Students are adopting a “live for today” philosophy.

This final observation summarizes the overall response of students living in a world of overwhelming complexity, immediate changeability, and future uncertainty: to live for the moment and hope that the future will take care of itself. The emphasis of this approach is on survival—to make it through the next test, to enroll for the next semester, to have enough money to make it to payday, and to find a party for the weekend. One sophomore student described his life as “living in a bubble.” He said, “I have no clue what is going on around me in the world. I look in the paper at the ads and drink specials; that is about all I have time for.” Another said, “I think if you spent all of your time thinking about issues going on around you, you would just go crazy! The only way to keep your sanity is to think about life one day, one thing at a time.”

HOW STUDENTS REACT TO A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

THE OBSERVATIONS just presented reflect an underlying theme: that students are affected in many ways by the growing complexity and accelerated rate of change in society. Students must face a very personal struggle in which they define and find purpose for their lives. Felix Geyer, a social science researcher from the Netherlands, has put forth a systemic view of how people adjust to the acceleration of change in this postmodern era that provides some insight into the struggles in which students are engaging. He said that complexity outside the person necessitates an increasingly adaptive ability within the individual to process and respond to accelerated change. The individual, according to Geyer, under the duress of fast environmental change must develop a high degree of tolerance for ambiguity and thus learn to thrive on uncertainty. To solve problems in novel situations, the individual needs to utilize options and possibilities as opportunities, and be willing to take calculated risks. Rapid informational processing must include an enhancement of mental skills that use intuitive and emotional intelligence. It also requires an attitude that will enable people to focus energy on what they can influence rather than being frustrated by that over which they have no control. Finally, people must be willing to give up old, socialized patterns (and suffer the potential of being alienated from them) in order to find and accept new, more viable social solutions.

Students are now muddling with ways to make these shifts, with varying degrees of preparation, capability, and success. Using Geyer’s response-to-change model, I will characterize three student stances that may serve as a template to explain the pattern of student behaviors that my student affairs colleagues and I have noticed.

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**Adaptors.** Adaptors are students who are already demonstrating the adjustment qualities outlined by Geyer. As a hypothetical example, Sally Smith is thriving in her college experience. She has just returned from a semester in London, where she was studying International Economics. While traveling the world she has kept in contact with a close-knit group of friends through daily exchanges of e-mail. During her last year of school she is living in a coed cooperative house with a diverse group of people. They share food preparation and housekeeping chores and have an obligatory house communication meeting every Sunday. Sally volunteers some time each week to serve as a Big Sister with a local United Way agency. She enjoys exercising in an aerobics class and wants to stay in shape so she can go mountain climbing over spring break. Sally also experienced some difficulties this year, when an important long-distance relationship broke off due to time and distance constraints that resulted from pursuing individual goals. As a way to sort out what she wants in relationships, Sally has joined a relationship group sponsored by the counseling center.

Our hypothetical Sally has qualities that are similar to many students now being seen in our counseling service. An exit survey of graduating students indicates that 40 percent have used the counseling service at some time during their campus life. Adaptors tend to make use of campus services.

**Avoiders.** Another large group of students uses avoidance to cope with the difficult choices created by change and complexity in society. Avoiders are characterized as minimally getting by, one day at a time, hoping that things will turn out well in the future. They also reveal underlying uncertainty, anxiety, and bewilderment about the course of their lives. Avoiders may seek assistance and service, but only when a crisis occurs (such as failing classes, experiencing conflict in a relationship, or encountering legal problems) and they have no other recourse than to find a way out of trouble.

Joe Cool is our example student. Joe has a marginal GPA; he says his classes are uninteresting, and he frequently cuts class unless he will be having a test or has a paper due. He enjoys the college social life, which for him means hanging out at the campus bars three or four nights a week. Joe transferred from an engineering major after his freshmen year because he was not meeting grade standards. He thought about going into business, but his grades made general studies his only option. Joe had some other rough times during the year, including breaking up with a person who was "tired of his attitude," and most recently, after wrecking his car, he was charged with driving under the influence. The court evaluation suggested that Joe should seek counseling as part of the court agreement. Joe represents a significant portion of counseling service clientele who are urged or required to seek service. This personal lack of motivation frequently makes them no-shows or quick dropouts from the helping process.

**Casualties.** The avoiders take some pride in their survival, but a third group is even more at risk. The members of this group, the casualties, suffer maladaptive or reactive responses to the world around them. They are the students with the most difficult problems, such as severe depression, advanced eating disorders, and post-traumatic stress symptoms. The number of casualties may be small, but in recent years this number has increased dramatically. Tracking of the most severe disorders on our campus (depression, anxiety, abuse or assault, and eating disorders) using case description data from the counseled population has indicated significant increases over the past eight years. Nationally, a survey of counseling center directors indicates that 80 percent believe that the severity of presenting student problems has increased in the last decade.

Community resources are available for some of these students at critical times. However, as providers have emphasized managed care and a philosophy of mainstreaming patients into community alternatives, the direction of mental health care in the greater community has been to reduce long-term and more intensive treatments. Even so, our director of health services estimates that more than a third of the students are not
covered by health insurance, which limits many off-campus options. Paradoxically, the campus has become an “after-care” resource for a small group of individuals suffering from severe mental health disorders who have been recommended by off-campus professionals to go into a college environment where they could develop job skills, reduce time pressures by taking a restricted number of courses, and have a built-in system of support services.

When our campus dealt with seven suicides in one recent year the practical ramifications of human crisis created a ripple across hundreds of students who had shared friendships, living space, and classes with the victims. The campus, as well as the greater community, struggles to find ways to deal with the control, treatment, and support of those with the most severe disorders.

THE RESPONSIVE CAMPUS

What can be done to create a more responsive campus? Alienation, severe personal problems, and adjustment to dramatic shifts in the world are not easily affected by an individual, a service unit, or a segmented approach to special populations. An effective response will entail a total campus effort. Even more important is the realization that faculty and staff will need to make adjustments and find creative new solutions to stay abreast of the changing milieu. Following are examples of what faculty and staff can do to be more responsive to students’ needs:

• Colleges must continue to be places where students explore their values, define their identity, and find meaning. It is apparent that “bull sessions,” encounter groups, and even the lively seminars in a general education curriculum are becoming passé. Some students thirsting for direction are seeking out the fundamental religious groups, in which a life map is more clearly defined. Ironically, however, even the religious communities are going through a period of upheaval and are searching for ways to make contact with the new generation. The college experience should encourage, even provoke, questioning of the purpose in a student’s life by providing opportunities for dialogue and idea exchange, both in and out of the classroom. Colleagues from another university exemplified this process when they introduced weekend retreats for student leaders based on Steven Covey’s model of personal effectiveness for student leaders. The leaders became so engaged with the process of determining personal values and meaning that they insisted the process be repeated with the organizations they represented.

• Students desire a community that is personal, responsive, caring, and respectful. This can be accomplished by providing students with living units in which support and responsibility are community objectives, by providing service learning opportunities that facilitate student contributions to society, and by offering leadership training programs. Most important, students need a campus where the faculty and staff communicate personal interest and attentiveness to students while at the same time expecting students to behave responsibly. As policymakers and norm setters for campus life, we must recognize that it is not sufficient to legislate “acceptable” conduct; more important, we must be role models and facilitators of constructive social behavior.

• Students need an opportunity to develop what Geyer identified as “adaptive skills for living.” These are the process skills that include old standards such as discipline and persistence but that also include a new emphasis on assimilation of data, intuition, information retrieval methods, complex problem solving, and cooperation and communication with a diverse, multicultural population. I know of one faculty that shifted the focus of a traditional study skills class to emphasize “learning to learn,” which invoked exploration of learning styles, motivation, support networks, emotion management, creativity enhancement, and similar topics.

• Because there are students with serious mental health problems, campus services cannot avoid providing necessary treatment to give these students the opportunity to succeed. This is not only ethically important, but in some cases may be part of the accommodation process to meet standards mandated by the federal Americans with Disabilities Act. Treatment is most effective when a person is engaged with an intervention that is not only early but that also occurs at a moment of readiness. This is most possible when the faculty, staff, and students of the
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Institution act as a network to recognize early warning signs, consult, troubleshoot, and refer potential student problems. Professional mental health workers must be prepared to offer efficient and effective interventions with the latest knowledge and technologies available in outpatient treatment.

An example of the adaptation made possible by using new technology is what has happened in the past five years at our counseling center. Computerized data management of all records helps track clients from intake to follow-up, measuring changes on more than 250 data variables. Using both qualitative and quantitative analysis of data, we now publish an annual "stockholders report" that both summarizes facts and provides anecdotes of counseling service activity and client outcomes. State-of-the-art computerized biofeedback equipment has been incorporated into a treatment facility for the number one student concern: stress. More than five hundred students made use of the stress management process in the past two years, and a new stress management assessment station has been opened in the most heavily trafficked location on campus: the recreation center. Our Internet homepage contains fifteen self-help topics that enable students, in the convenience of their own rooms, to use the Web to read about, listen to, and interact on issues such as stress management, getting a good night's sleep, and maintaining a healthy relationship.

Finally, faculty and staff, like students, are experiencing reactions to growing complexity in their environment. At the same time, they experience greater pressure, more competition, and more demands on their time than in former eras to achieve tenure or promotion. Faculty themselves might become avoiders of change unless institutional priorities recognize that it is they who retool, innovate, and commit energy to assist students in becoming successful learners who will be prepared to make adjustments to the world in the twenty-first century. Alverno College is one example of a campus that has made a collective effort to provide a vital and productive learning community (see About Campus, July/Aug. 1997, pp. 16-21).

Admittedly, I feel both the excitement and the uneasiness of the rapidity of recent changes, and at the same time, recognize that innovations are just beginning. The dawn of the twenty-first century compels us to pay attention to the warning Bob Dylan issued years ago, "the times they are a-changin'" now more than ever before, and as educators, we must become visionaries uniting the traditions of the past with the myriad possibilities for the future.

NOTES