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## Hope as a Potential Transformative Power

Marlenee Blas

*What is hope? In an effort to break cycles and transform higher education, I propose that we, student affairs professionals, engage in the practice of hope. Drawing from the work of thinkers like Gustavo Esteva (2003), Paulo Freire (1974), and Vaclav Havel (1991), this reflective essay proposes a hope that is impact-conscious of societal expectations. First, I will define hope and explore the inherent expectations. Next, I will suggest a hope that is humble, moving, and alive. From this intervention, I will call for the regeneration of our relations, understanding, and practices of hope as they relate to educational practice. I will conclude with a summary of what hope implies for higher education and student affairs professionals.*

As student affairs professionals, we make efforts to assist and mentor students, yet when our services and departments undergo changes, deficits, or conflicts it may be difficult to see past these challenges. In response to the stress and uncertainty, departments and staff personnel may engage in the practice of hope. However, is our hope broadly defined by expectations? How do we practice hope? Drawing from the work of Esteva (2003), Freire (1974), and Havel (1991), this reflective essay discusses the various forms and practices of hope. It also provides an approach that can transform the practice of hope in higher education and student affairs.

### Defining Hope

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2012), hope is defined as “to cherish a desire with anticipation...desire accompanied by expectation (n.p).” These conventional views of hope are broadly defined by societal expectations. With this context, it is important to question how hope and expectations of hope relate to student affairs professionals. Chickering, Gamson, and Barsi (1987) highlight the role that expectations play in the profession in *Principles in Good Practice for Student Affairs*. Generally, there is an underlying assumption that hope is broadly classified by expectations and that those expectations should be used as a tool for “good practice.” Although expectations provide guidance, viewing hope as synonymous with, or solely defined by, expectations opposes conventional practices of hope.

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## Perspectives of Hope

### *Hope and Expectations (Esteva, 2003)*

Esteva is a prolific activist, organizer, and writer from Oaxaca, Mexico, yet his publications represent only a small fraction of his work with indigenous communities. In his 2003 essay, *The Meaning and Scope of the Struggle for Autonomy*, he asserts indigenous communities “know that they cannot exist without a vision of the future, but they do not pretend to control that future” (Esteva, 2003, p. 246). They practice, live, and engage in hope “instead of the arrogant expectations of modern man, based on the assumption that the future is programmable” (p. 246).

Communities facing struggle, displacement, and violence maintain hope and are aware that these may or may not be fulfilled. Esteva (2003) points out a major aspect of hope, shifting focus from expectations to the act of nourishing hope but without holding onto it. “They have not been able to avoid the experience of modernity, but they have not become rooted in it” (Esteva, 2003, p. 247). This understanding of hope demonstrates the transformative possibilities that arise when hope is practiced and theorized in multiple modes. Focusing on hope as a genuine effort of practice, one that does not attempt to predict, assume, or control the outcome, is powerful. As Esteva (2003) describes, the hope that is rooted in the culture is one that does not expect a specific result; it is one that acknowledges the possibilities, well aware of disappointment.

I had the opportunity to meet Esteva in March 2012. In an attempt to illustrate hope, he spoke of a pregnant woman from an indigenous community who never questioned the sex, due date, or even prepared potential names for the anticipated child. Esteva (2012) explained how this community hopes, rather than expects, the baby be born in nine months. Indigenous communities have refrained from Western conventions of seeking answers to control how and when things occur. However, they will do whatever they are capable in order to foster the birth of the child. In this sense, neither the couple, nor the community, depend on or make assumptions of, the future, especially one they do not know and cannot control. This practice about hope is transformative, for it fosters a different perspective on life events, such as birth.

### *Hope and Liberation (Freire, 1974)*

To better understand this transformative difference between hope and expectation, Freire (1974) offers liberation as a challenge to conventional thinking of hope. In his writing, he introduces the importance of hope in the struggle for liberation. Freire (1974) wrote:

While I certainly cannot ignore hopelessness as a concrete entity, nor turn a blind eye to the historical, economic, and social reasons that explain hopelessness, I don't understand human existence, and the struggle needed to improve it, apart from hope and dream. (p. 2)

Freire (1974) believed “hopelessness is but hope that has lost its bearing and become a distortion of that ontological need” (p. 2). Freire indicates that the ontological need, the nature and relations of being, is at the focal point. It is important to note, that hope alone is not enough, as Freire suggests, yet it is necessary. According to Freire (1974), “alone [hope] does not win...we need critical hope the way fish needs unpolluted water” (p. 2). Using Freire's (1974) fish metaphor, unpolluted water allows for the fish to not only live but also to flourish. Similarly, critical hope allows us not only to act but also calls on us to be cautious and intentional with our actions. Critical hope is cognizant of the limitations of political, historical, and social structures that are in place, and yet believes and acts within a hopeful framework. Critical hope, as described by Freire (1974), is vital to liberation, yet it is not naïve; it is powerful and has potential to transform beyond the social structures that may challenge its practice.

*Hope and Conviction (Havel, 1991)*

Another perspective that is important to discuss when looking at the practice of hope is that of Havel (1991). He was a writer, politician and human rights advocate and recipient of the Gandhi Peace Prize. In his work he draws the distinction between hope and optimism and affirms that “hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well but the conviction that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out” (Havel, 1991, p. 181). Havel (1991) illustrates how the conviction and the belief in one's thoughts and actions are bounded by the belief that what we are doing makes sense. This hope is focused in the journey, the pathway, and the practice. For example, Havel (1991) locates the practice of hope by asserting that:

Hope is a state of mind, not of the world. Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good. (p. 181)

These actions nourish the hope. They affirm the process, the people, and the decision we make along the way. In this sense, hope is transformative, one that is conscious of the power and impact it can potentially have.

## Hope and Higher Education

The writings of Esteva (2003), Freire (1974), and Havel (1991) introduce multifaceted views of hope and provoke us to reflect upon how we as student affairs professionals practice hope. In our field, it is important to examine the process of hope in which we engage while working with students and colleagues. The hope is that we will consider what Esteva (2003) offers: a perspective of hope that is not solely focused on expectations. Furthermore, this opportunity allows us to draw from the pedagogy of Freire (1974). His work challenges us to chart critical consciousness in the practice of hope. Referring to the work of Havel (1991), we are guided by the convictions of hope, which invites us to question how we may transform our own conventions and perceptions of hope. This raises the questions: what does hope look like from this framework? What does that mean for educators and students?

While guidelines and high expectations are prescribed as models of good practice, we need to further understand the intentions outlined (Chickering et al., 1987). In our role as educators, we may have expectations and goals for the students and communities we foster; however, there is a danger in assuming that such expectations are our practices of hope. Hope, as indicated by Esteva (2003), is communal and aware of the pressures and dangers posed by expectations. With this analysis, and in keeping our creativity and thoughtfulness of how we practice hope, how do we encourage students to be hopeful? Perhaps it is also important that we refrain from using expectation and hope interchangeably so we do not face the emotional effects of disappointment from seeing our expectations unmet. For example, we can orient our hope in our compassion, our critical perceptions of their situation, context, and agency. The transformative power of hope can be a catalyst to our work as we engage with students.

Although hope was thoughtful as Freire understood it, he cautioned educators not to turn his pedagogy into a methodology (Williams, 1999). Freire (1974) suggests that we can reinvent the concepts as educators within the context of the learners. According to Giroux (2010):

Education and hope are the conditions of social action and political change. Acutely aware that many contemporary versions of hope occupied their own corner in Disneyland, Paulo [Freire] was passionate about recovering and rearticulating hope through, in his words, an ‘understanding of history as opportunity and not determinism.’ (p. 3)

From the context of Freire (1974), hope is essential to liberation and transformation, and we need to understand the complexities inherited. As practitioners, we

need to be conscious and contextualize our ideas in order to reinvent our learning, our practice, and ourselves.

Furthermore, taking from the writings of Havel (1991), we can transform our hope into a process. As educators and professionals we are invited to recognize the importance of the journey of hope and thus refrain from controlling the outcome and results. Through this lens, hope is patient and trusts the process. As student affairs professionals, we can do what makes sense at the time based on the circumstances. To transform higher education, we can engage in the process of hope, so that it is reproduced and hence “give rise to the possibility that the students become the owners of their own history” (Freire, 1974, p. 324). In our practice of hope we allow students to be hopeful for their own sake, own creation of dreams, and for their own liberation. The restoration of hope is important and it is an “essential part of learning” that provides students with possibilities. Without such possibilities, “students become immobilized by their own despair” (Tatum, 1994, p. 473).

In reflection, we may examine the complexity, unconventionality and broader aspects of hope as a means to transform higher education. These thinkers offer various perspectives and, although they may process hope through different historical and regional contexts, their concerns and contributions may overlap effectively within a United States student affairs practice. I recognize that this essay expands on the perspectives of three men, and acknowledge possible gender variations of the expression and practice of hope. In efforts to trace the complexity and multifaceted practice of hope, I chose the selected works to further understand dynamics and dialogue around hope. This is only a small contribution to the conversation that encourages us to be thoughtful, communal, and open to a process of consideration. The selected life-work of Esteva (2003), Freire (1974), and Havel (1991) offer fascinating insights and understanding of hope through various lenses. Weaving the various perspectives and practices of hope can help us understand the potential transformative power that is vital to contemporary educators and professionals in higher education and student affairs.

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