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A number of assumptions inform the AISP model. This chapter identifies several of those and explores their implications for the application of the model in contemporary student affairs practice in a variety of institutional contexts.

Will It Work Both Here and There? The AISP Model in Various Institutional Contexts

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The work of Ursula Delworth and her colleagues twenty years ago in describing the Assessment-Intervention of Student Problems (AISP) model and offering insights into its application (Delworth, 1989) is as timely to the practice of student affairs and the support of student success today as it was when the work first appeared. This is not to say, however, that the model ought to be understood today as it was understood then. Much has changed in the higher education landscape in the intervening years (see Chapter One, this volume), and those changes have implications for contemporary practice using the AISP model.

One change since the original publication of the work of Delworth and her colleagues is the growing recognition that the practice of student affairs may vary in significant ways depending on the institutional context in which it is undertaken (Barr, 2000; Hirt, 2006). The purpose of this chapter is to explore the ways in which institutional context might shape the ways the model is implemented on a particular campus. We undertake our exploration by examining four assumptions necessary to support the hypothesis that the AISP model is universally applicable to all institutions. Along the way we offer several case study examples demonstrating how the model might be applied in varying institutional contexts.
The Assumption of a Duty of Care

Positing that the AISP model is appropriate for use at all institutions requires acceptance of several assumptions. First is an assumption that an ethical and legal duty of care exists on the part of the institution to the student whose behavior has generated concern, as well as to others at the institution who might be affected by that behavior. The ethical framework that guides student affairs professional practice, perhaps most commonly understood through the principles articulated by Kitchener (1985), can and should guide our work no matter what the context. However, the extent to which there is a universal legal duty of care (see Bickel and Lake, 1999, for a robust discussion of this legal principle) on the part of higher education institutions to their students and those who come in contact with those students is far less apparent. Is the duty of care on the part of an institution the same for a full-time student sitting in a classroom at an institution offering blended instructional opportunities as it is for a part-time student sitting at home in another country taking a course from an online institution? Is the duty of care the same for nonprofit institutions as it is for proprietary for-profit institutions? It is reasonable to suggest that there are differences in the legal duty of care based on institutional context and that case law will emerge offering evolving guidance in this area.

The Assumption of Eurocentric and Secular Practice

A second assumption regarding the universality of the AISP model is its reliance on particular notions (primarily Eurocentric and secular) of appropriate behavior, disciplinary functions, and counseling interventions. Can and should the model be adapted for practice at an institution shaped by a religious philosophy that puts trust for healing in the hands of a divine power rather than in the medical or psychological professions? Similar questions might arise when considering the case of a tribally controlled college at which an Indigenous construction of healing and the role of discipline may guide practice.

The Assumption of Boundaries

A third assumption required to make the case for universal applicability of the AISP model is that boundaries of the interaction between institution and student are clear and fixed. A student’s behavior as observed in a classroom, residence hall, or university commons gives rise to concern. That concern is conveyed to a team comprising players with well-understood roles, and they follow up based on their informed understanding of the situation, best practices in the field, institutional policy, and applicable law. How is that assumption challenged by a case involving a student engaged in extended study abroad? What are best practices for informing potential internship sites about their responsibilities for reporting concerns and avenues for reporting such concerns? To what extent does an institution become involved in a situation
in which a student who is participating in a noncredit-bearing volunteer experience advertised through a campus resource and encouraged by a student activities program begins to exhibit disturbed or disturbing behavior? As McClellan and Stringer (2009) note, the boundaries that have informed our understanding of higher education and therefore shaped our practice of student affairs are eroding. While the diminishment of boundaries opens exciting possibilities in constructing learning opportunities, it also presents a challenge to one of the important assumptions informing the application of the AISP model.

Observations regarding the assumption of duty of care and the assumption of Eurocentric and secular practice present serious challenges to the suggestion that the AISP model is an appropriate or helpful choice in all institutional contexts or even in certain situations in a given institutional context where the model might otherwise be used. However, thoughtful consideration of the assumption of boundaries leads to consideration of appropriate adaptation rather than forbearance. The following case study offers an example of such an adaptation.

**The Case of a Community College**

The student activity areas of a suburban community college are bustling around the noon hour in late August. The campus radio station is broadcasting from the Quad while leaders of campus clubs and organizations are at tables recruiting students. It looks like a great start to another academic year.

Sarah picks up information from two clubs and proceeds to the lounge near the student activity office. Sarah is twenty-two years old and has been a student at the college, on and off, for about three years. She lives with her mother and holds a variety of part-time jobs in the community. She is very familiar with the campus and its services and activities. Sarah regularly hangs around the student activity lounge, often until 11:00 P.M. She is well known to students but does not have close friends. She is very bright, according to test results, although her academic record reflects more dropped courses than completed ones. On this beautiful August day, Sarah finds her couch in the student lounge and pulls out a box cutter from her purse. She looks down at her hands, filled with scars from previous visits to her couch, and feels the familiar sense of release with the first cut as the blood trickles down over her fingers.

Self-injurers like Sarah scare and mystify other students and staff because it seems incomprehensible to deliberately hurt oneself. By all accounts, Sarah is disturbed. She has had a difficult life with a history of sexual abuse as a young person. Students are concerned for her. Many assume she is suicidal; all are uncomfortable with her self-injuring behavior. The first time it happened, the campus police assisted her to the local hospital, where she was immediately treated for minor cuts and released. The incident was not reported to counseling or to the student conduct office. The next time, Sarah was not seen cutting herself. Rather, a staff member saw
Sarah sitting on the couch, hiding her hands under the cushions. After observing blood stains and asking Sarah if she needed help, the staff member accompanied her to health and psychological services. She was treated and also introduced to the psychologist. She saw the therapist for a few visits but then disappeared. On a very large community college campus, Sarah could hide because the helpers were not initially talking to each other, and when her behavior was disturbing, she would find new spots on campus or sometimes she would just drop out midsemester. Although she has been at college for three years, she has completed very few hours toward a degree.

A subsequent campus police report indicated that Sarah was found sleeping in a student cybercafé after the campus was closed for the night. Blood was found on the keyboard. Conversations with her mother reveal that Sarah has been kicked out of her home because neither of her divorced parents can cope with her disturbing behavior. Now she is homeless.

At its next regularly scheduled meeting, the campus intervention team discussed Sarah’s disturbing behavior, as well as her physical and mental health needs. She was referred for student code of conduct violations. Sarah never denied her behavior. As a result of judicial sanctions, Sarah agreed not to self-injure on campus and signed a restrictive behavior contract to that effect. She also agreed to participate in a mental health evaluation off campus. She brought medical statements back indicating that she was not a danger to herself or others, with a recommendation to be allowed to attend classes.

Sarah’s disturbing behavior was well known to those in her home community, particularly her family, the local social services, and medical facilities. Previously established partnerships with the local social service organization helped to develop a behavior contract that was also supported off campus. She agreed to voluntarily go to either the college’s health and psychological services center or her local mental health center when the urges were overwhelming. The two agencies signed waivers and agreements to communicate. In addition, for others on campus, psychological services held sessions for staff and students about the facts on self-injurers. Understanding the facts of the disorder helped others feel more comfortable when interacting with Sarah. Despite these efforts, Sarah’s behavior on campus continues to be disturbing.

Later, when the local police picked Sarah up for loitering, they automatically contacted their liaisons in the campus police to determine a course of action that might best assist Sarah in getting help. Sarah agreed to attend a day hospital program for self-injurers. Staff at the college’s health and psychological services center worked in conjunction with the hospital program to keep Sarah in school. Sarah also worked with a local social service agency and the college’s women’s program to find suitable housing.

The role that the community college plays in the lives of its students has extended far beyond the boundaries of the parking lots. For this reason, established linkages with families, social services, medical agencies, public safety departments, and local housing operations are keys to effective assess-
ment intervention on the community college campus. Continuous outreach into the community by the professionals in student affairs to establish working relations with the community agencies served by the college is becoming an integral part of the job. The use of the AISP model, in conjunction with the development of working relationships between the college and the community, helps ensure that students like Sarah have less of a chance of getting caught in the revolving door.

The Assumption of Resources

The fourth assumption necessary to support the universality of the AISP model is that an institution has access to sufficient resources to successfully implement and use the model. As it was originally described, the AISP model presumes input regarding student behavior from those with sufficient interactions and interest to be invested in following up on concerns about a student. That feedback is received by a team made up of a number of various campus personnel, including professionals in health care, counseling, law enforcement, and legal affairs.

Eklund-Leen (1989) addressed the resource of sufficient interaction in her chapter in the original volume on using the AISP model in working with commuter students. As she noted in that chapter, campus interactions with commuter students may be more limited than those for students living on campus, though the frequency of interactions can be more substantial when a commuter student becomes actively engaged in campus life. However, Eklund-Leen appears to include an assumption that information regarding student behavior can come only from campus sources. As illustrated in the case study, one way that a campus with commuter students might adapt the AISP model is to intentionally open lines of communication regarding behavior with the families, roommates, and other significant associates of students. Providing information on recognizing troubling behaviors and on channels for sharing concerns about behavior with campus officials through Web-based resources, printed materials, orientation sessions, and workshops open to the public could also be helpful.

Another resource presumed in the original description of the AISP model is sufficient staff resources to allow the formation of a behavioral intervention team. Student affairs staff at smaller institutions, however, may serve in positions combining the responsibilities typically associated with several positions at larger institutions, and staff at smaller institutions and rural institutions may not have the benefit of either graduate preparation in student affairs or extensive professional development opportunities. Similarly, smaller institutions and rural institutions are less likely to have either a sworn police force or mental health counseling services on campus.

Like shifting or eroding boundaries, scarcity of resources can be addressed through adaptation of the AISP model rather than forbearance of
its use. Indeed, given the elegant simplicity of the model, implementing such adaptations may be particularly helpful on campuses with scarce resources. The following case studies demonstrate that point.

The Case of a Small Rural Institution

Diane is the new senior student affairs officer in a small rural college located some distance from any major metropolitan area. The year prior to her arrival, the school had an incident in which a student physically assaulted a staff member. The campus community was critical of the former vice president and his staff for underreacting to the many warning signs of violence presented by the student prior to the assault. The former vice president of student affairs cited scarcity of resources, including the lack of an on-campus counseling center, a nonsworn security force, and limited staff as reasons for the lack of response to the student’s behavior.

Diane established a campus intervention team to ensure a mechanism for exploring and monitoring concerns regarding troubling student behavior. The team includes a contracted psychologist from a community mental health service several miles from campus, as well as college staff from security, housing and campus discipline (responsibilities shared by a single staff member), and academic affairs.

Diane knew the AISP model could be easily understood by persons with a variety of levels of experience and education regarding student behavior and mental health issues. She used the model in providing intensive training for the campus intervention team and appropriately less intensive training for faculty, staff, and students (including residence hall staff and campus leaders among others). Diane hoped a campus trained to distinguish between disturbed and disturbing behavior would feel less anxious when such behaviors occur and would be more likely to take appropriate, caring, and helpful action. Her goal in providing the training for a variety of groups across campus was to help extend limited staff resources to facilitate recognition, reporting, and response to potential behavioral problems.

Diane and her staff implemented the model for the first time with Michael. At the age of eighteen, Michael began college. His high school record showed him to be a bright and extremely capable student. At orientation, he appeared very engaged—asking lots of questions—but was somewhat awkward around his peers. As the fall semester progressed, Michael displayed poor social skills. He had difficulty picking up nonverbal or social cues and occasionally used inappropriate expressions. In addition, he had an all-absorbing, narrow interest with video games, particularly war games involving violence. One game in particular involved attacking opponents and mass killings throughout the assault.

Michael first came to Diane’s attention when campus security received a concerned call from his parents at 3:00 A.M. because they had not been
able to reach him all evening. They had left messages on both his room and cell phones earlier in the day, but Michael had not responded. His roommate had not seen him since he left for a 2:00 P.M. class. The parents informed security that Michael was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, a high-functioning form of autism. Security began a search for Michael throughout the entire campus, looking in all buildings. He was eventually found at 4:30 A.M. in one of the basement computer labs. He had become so involved with playing a game that he lost track of time and forgot he was supposed to check in with his parents.

Diane met with Michael the following day, and he was very apologetic. She discussed his Asperger’s and encouraged him to work with the school’s disability services officer. Michael was reluctant, indicating he was seeing a psychologist and a psychiatrist and that high school was a very bad experience for him. He wanted to start fresh in college. It was important to him that nobody label him with a disability, and he was upset his parents mentioned Asperger’s to the security officer.

In spite of this episode, Michael began to settle into college life. His peers seemed to tolerate his idiosyncrasies, although some considered him odd. Michael joined a number of campus organizations, even taking on some leadership positions. The fall semester finished uneventfully for him.

During the third week of the spring semester, security received a call from an English professor with a concern about a disturbing paper written in a creative writing class. It was the first assignment of the course, and students were instructed to write about something of interest to them. Michael wrote about violence and killing—some of it very graphic. The faculty member described Michael as odd and was concerned the writing could be a warning sign. The faculty member was concerned this could be a repeat of the previous year’s incident and saw Michael as a threat.

Having been trained in the AISP model, security was familiar with the disturbed/disturbing concepts. In reviewing the security logs and Michael’s record, they took note of the call from his parents earlier in the year identifying him with Asperger’s syndrome. They also checked his background but found no criminal record or violent tendency. Through interviews with his roommate and friends, they discovered Michael’s interest in video games. When Michael was interviewed, he indicated his paper was about strategies used to overcome an opponent in one of the games he played.

Diane assembled the trained campus intervention team. The contracted psychologist prepared a brief on Asperger’s syndrome for all team members. The information gathered by security was also provided to the committee. Michael voluntarily met with the contracted psychologist and provided supporting letters from both his personal psychologist and a psychiatrist. As the AISP model encourages, open communications (within the law) and accurate information will lead to an intervention that is in the best interest of the student and the campus.
It was apparent to the team that Michael was not a threat to the campus community. The intervention team recommended he register with disability services. Furthermore, supported by input from Michael’s psychologist, the team recommended his participation in social skills training. Upon receiving the appropriate releases, the academic affairs and disability services representatives of the campus intervention team met with Michael’s English professor to review the team’s recommendations and the facts of Asperger’s syndrome. Understanding about Asperger’s syndrome, coupled with academic affairs’ involvement in the campus intervention team, helped the faculty member better assist Michael to succeed in his class.

**The Case of a Teaching-Centered Institution**

Nearly three years ago Pauline and her mother arrived from a large east coast city to live in a small midwestern town. She and her mother had relocated hoping for a better life, only to find themselves in dire financial circumstances. For months, they lived in a shelter without finding work. Pauline discovered firsthand how difficult the job market could be without an education and, after obtaining her GED, decided to create more opportunities through pursuing a college education.

Pauline was accepted to the local small, private, liberal arts college and received notice she would receive a scholarship designed for students with high financial need. To receive the funds, Pauline needed to remain involved in documented community service projects while enrolled and during the summer months, attend regular meetings of the scholarship recipients, and remain in good social and academic standing.

During her first year, Pauline performed adequately in her classes and fulfilled the minimum community service requirements of her scholarship. She seemed to enjoy the meetings of the scholarship recipients and often took center stage during discussions. She also met regularly with her faculty advisor, which allowed them to establish a constructive and open relationship.

In order to fulfill her scholarship responsibilities during the summer and receive her annual community service stipend, Pauline decided to work at the shelter where she had previously stayed. But she barely completed enough hours to meet the minimum requirements for her summer community service and did not receive a positive evaluation. Her supervisor noted that she was often late, failed to call when she did not come to work, blamed others for her mistakes, and needed a great deal of attention, which strained communication with the youth at the shelter. She even mentioned that Pauline might have been better served at an alternate service site.

Pauline met with her faculty advisor before the first day of classes of her sophomore year to discuss course selection and her summer service experience. As they reviewed the supervisor evaluation, Pauline revealed that she had not sought assistance from the scholarship program faculty coordinator and blamed her supervisor at the shelter for not seeing the value of her con-
tributions. Pauline’s faculty advisor became concerned about this blaming behavior. She asked Pauline to schedule another appointment to continue their discussion and notified the scholarship program faculty coordinator.

During the term, Pauline’s performance slipped when she began neglecting written assignments. Faculty members noticed that she was generally unprepared for classroom discussions and contributed little beyond summaries of general ideas. Pauline’s faculty advisor met with her to discover what would help Pauline get back on track. The meeting went differently than expected. She learned more about Pauline’s summer service and began to wonder if that experience may have influenced Pauline’s performance this term. Pauline had become involved with a former client of the shelter who had been banned from the shelter for policy violations. Also, Pauline’s comments implied that she had lost interest in continuing her studies. Despite inquiring by her advisor, Pauline would not provide further comments. Pauline’s advisor arranged a meeting with all of Pauline’s faculty members, hoping that they might have more information about Pauline.

Despite her faculty advisor’s best efforts with repeated meetings with Pauline and separate meetings with her other faculty members, Pauline’s performance did not improve. At the end of the term, Pauline was placed on academic warning and then chose to take a leave of absence for the next term. Unfortunately her leave of absence made additional interventions more complicated. When a student is placed on academic warning or probation, all need-to-know parties receive notification so appropriate interventions can be implemented. Pauline’s faculty advisor convened a meeting with the associate dean of students and the scholarship program faculty coordinator to be certain that all were fully apprised of Pauline’s situation and poised to provide adequate support.

The team decided to reach out to Pauline during her leave of absence and the summer. Despite their repeated attempts to contact Pauline, she failed to return calls or e-mail. Concern soared when Pauline failed to provide adequate documentation to verify a summer community service engagement. They began to wonder if they would see Pauline again.

Upon her return to campus, Pauline received notification that she had been placed on probation for her scholarship, notified that she would not receive a stipend for the past summer, and informed of conditions she needed to meet in order for her service stipend to be reinstated. Despite multiple conversations with her faculty advisor and the scholarship program faculty coordinator, Pauline would not admit to any role in her own problems. Instead, she blamed nearly everyone else for her scholarship probation and claimed she was owed a service stipend for the summer. Also, Pauline’s behavior changed dramatically. In two classes, her attendance became alarmingly irregular and her performance markedly declined. Her attendance at scholarship meetings was equally erratic. She also began to show little interest in meeting specified course requirements and instead focused almost entirely on professing her own agenda. In a journalism class,
the professor commented that Pauline’s agenda made it impossible for her to adequately report on issues. Instead of news writing, Pauline designed a public relations campaign to receive her stipend for the past summer. Her behavior in the residence hall also became problematic. She spent much of her time in residence hall kitchens and common spaces trying to recruit allies in her quest for her stipend. Students complained that Pauline was extremely insistent and impossible to avoid. Pauline also began meditative drumming, about which the residence hall staff also received repeated complaints.

Once again Pauline’s faculty advisor, the scholarship program faculty coordinator, and the associate dean of students met and included Pauline’s journalism professor and residence hall director. After several meetings, individual conversations with Pauline, and a referral to counseling in lieu of judicial proceedings, Pauline no longer drummed in her residence hall and seldom visited the common areas or the kitchen. Just before the end of the term, the residence hall staff became convinced that these steps had ended Pauline’s unwanted behavior in the hall. The faculty members still expressed concern about Pauline’s academic performance and believed she could not successfully finish the term.

Pauline was placed on academic probation. A few days after the next term began, Pauline received a letter notifying her that she had not met the terms of her scholarship probation and that it would not be renewed the following year. Pauline could not accept the loss of her scholarship and began writing letters to everyone who might influence her situation. She skipped classes and drummed in public locations across campus to solicit support from students, faculty, and staff. The scholarship program faculty coordinator became increasingly concerned about this new development, so she called another meeting of the intervention team and included all of Pauline’s professors. Subsequently Pauline’s faculty advisor and the associate dean of students met with Pauline regarding the reasons for Pauline’s loss of the scholarship and probable ramifications from her renewed drumming and class absences. Afterward they wondered how effective the meeting had been.

Refusing to give up, Pauline wrote to the college president and reached a breaking point when the president declined to intervene. Pauline began drumming and chanting outside his office window hoping for a reversal of the decision. Pauline’s faculty advisor and the associate dean of students met with her again and discerned an even more obsessive yearning to achieve her objective. Pauline’s behavior had escalated despite repeated attempts to help her understand the counterproductive nature of her actions. Substantiated accusations surfaced about several instances where her behavior was perceived as threatening. A student conduct board hearing was scheduled.

Because the members of the intervention team had such in-depth knowledge of Pauline’s behavior during the past two years, they were requested to provide written statements for the director of judicial affairs
prior to Pauline’s hearing. As a result of this process, the team decided that Pauline would be dismissed. Had she not faced a judicial hearing, she would have faced academic withdrawal because of class absences and inadequate performance.

**Conclusion**

The AISP model is an attractive and useful framework for the practice of student affairs for a number of reasons. While it can be argued that the model is a foundational work in our field, this chapter has presented arguments indicating that the model as originally constructed may not be appropriate or helpful in all settings and may reach its fullest potential only when thoughtfully adapted for the contemporary realities and institutional contexts of professional practice.

**References**


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