

South African Student Affairs: Professionalization of Student Affairs in the Service of Social Justice

Birgit Schreiber (PhD), Stellenbosch University, South Africa, birgitdewes@gmail.com,

Thierry Luescher (PhD), University of the Free State, South Africa

The higher education sector in South Africa is considered a vital force for national social-economic development and Student Affairs is expected to be a key contributor to institutional and student performance (DoE, 1997). In recent years, Student Affairs has changed its very *raison d'être* from peripheral offices focusing on generic student welfare services and the containment of student unrest into differentiated performance-driven departments which focus on student performance, support and advocacy, student engagement, the development of citizenship competences, research, and university and national higher education policy, and shaping institutional contexts to enable students to flourish and acquire key attributes of gradueness (CHE, 2014; DHET, 2010; Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014; Luescher-Mamashela et al., 2015; Pandor, 2007; Schreiber, 2013).

In order to fortify Student Affairs' contribution, the turn towards professionalization of this domain via academic degrees and courses is seen at many universities and national agencies with regard to training and development for Student Affairs staff located within academic disciplines, publishing in Student Affairs-specific journals (for instance the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, see, www.jsaa.ac.za) and the promotion of scholarship and research by means of the South African National Resource Agency focussing on the First Year Experience (see, sanrc.co.za) and the South African Survey of Student Engagement (see, sasse.ufs.ac.za).

However, the articulation of a conceptually coherent and transdisciplinary meta-framework for Student Affairs remains elusive. This is in parts due to the multiple coexisting realities and shifting fault lines which burden the overall performance of the South African higher education sector, many of which are a legacy of apartheid. The 2015 student-university discontent around issues of institutional culture, language, student fees and funding, and the indigenization of curricula which came to be known as #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall, and so forth, has highlighted common and uneven challenges across the sector (Cohen, 2015; Lund, 2015).

The increased pressure on higher education to function as a social-economic 'equalizer' leads to the increased demand on universities to widen student access (Castell, 2001; Cloete, Maassen & Bailey, 2015). This 'massification' implies that a wider range of learners with broader profiles of academic preparedness enter and progress through universities, forcing universities to review pedagogic and engagement practices (Bozalek & Carolissen, 2014; Schreiber, 2014). Student Affairs is positioned to facilitate the shift towards more socially just engagements with students by enabling the shift towards principles of Critical Social Theory, such as Participatory Parity (Fraser, 2009), Universal Design for Learning, and ontologic-epistemic Student Engagement (Hallpike, 2014; Kuh, 2009; Trowler, 2010). It is essential to "adopt a structural analytic approach" (Osei-Kofi, 2015, in Magolda & Baxter Magolda, 2015, p. 391) to strengthen the advocacy role and to translate this into praxis. This will equip students and higher education to challenge hegemonic assumptions complicit in the maintenance of the very structures which perpetuate positionality and privilege. Professionalizing Student Affairs capacitates this critical role in Higher Education. It is a key step towards transforming the underlying social structures which maintain the continued inequities in the larger social-economic context of South Africa.

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