An overview of critical issues in the student affairs profession: A South African perspective

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Summary

Drawing on the insights of Sandeen and Barr (2006) as well as the National Development Plan, the Strategic Plan of the Department of Higher Education and Training and other relevant documents, this paper reflects on some of the critical issues facing student affairs in general, and practitioners within the South African context in particular. Acknowledging the complexity of the South African context, the article reflects on broader national as well as more specific institutional issues that present themselves as challenges and opportunities for student affairs. Such challenges include questions pertaining to the profession itself as well as to critical issues and challenges in the field of work as experienced specifically by student affairs practitioners in South Africa. Ultimately student affairs professionals are cautioned to guard against self-marginalisation within the higher education sector. Student affairs units are urged to claim their rightful and crucial role in the total learning experience of students.

Introduction

The current context of higher education presents student affairs with many challenges. ‘The ever-changing role of student affairs has now become more complex due to diversity of age, ethnic, academic and financial backgrounds of
students’ (Lumadi & Mampuru 2010: 716). These challenges are not limited to our South African context. The 1998 World Declaration on Higher Education (WDHE) lists the following challenges:

- financing, equality of access, widening participation, the improvement of support and developmental services, effective use of technology (including distance learning), use of new and more flexible learning formats, ensuring student attainment of new skills and increased employability, as well as the need for international co-operation. (UNESCO 2002: 8)

Student affairs professionals and practitioners play a very important role in institutions of higher learning. They are strategically placed to engage with students in a meaningful way to bring together ‘in-class’ and ‘out-of-class’ experiences and to enhance the total learning experience of students, fulfilling the aim of higher education in general, namely to develop well-rounded graduates. Student affairs practitioners are also best placed within institutions to ensure that the holistic and integrated development and care of students are taken seriously and applied. To be able to play this critical role, student affairs professionals have to take themselves and their work seriously, continuously re-evaluating what they are doing, speak with authority and guard against self-marginalisation. They have the opportunity to be partners in the academic project to educate students in the South Africa of the 21st century, ‘who will have to contend with increasingly perilous social circumstances’, but also ‘extraordinary possibilities for transforming our world into one that is socially just, compassionate and environmentally responsible’ (Waghid 2011: 5). However, appreciation and acknowledgment of their position and role as partners are crucial in order for institutions and the higher education sector to deliver on their mandate. This is a key element in the paper and it will surface at various points in the discussion.

The critical issues discussed here do not represent an absolute or complete list, but they stem from my personal reflection as a student affairs professional at Stellenbosch University and as secretary general of the South African Association for Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP) for the last four years.

This paper discusses a proposal for the foundation of the student affairs profession and looks at the vital role the transformation agenda plays within the higher education sector and within the broader socio-political context of South Africa. It then focuses on the financial needs and the challenges faced by many students who have put their hopes in attaining a degree as a means to a better life. The discussion then moves to the importance of cultivating and developing
ethical leadership as a way to build credibility for the profession. The discussion is concluded by pointing the way forward for student affairs professionals and practitioners, as well as listing a number of challenges.

The foundation of the student affairs profession

Sandeen and Barr (2006: 1) correctly identify the question about the foundation of student affairs as the first critical issue for consideration by student affairs professionals. In their view,

> [t]he foundation of any profession is formed from a shared philosophy about what needs to be done, a shared understanding of the theoretical constructs that inform the practice of the profession, the application of the accumulated knowledge of the members to the tasks that need to be accomplished, and the ability of the practitioners of the profession to effectively link their theoretical knowledge, practical wisdom, and skills to larger organizations and society.

The strong foundations of any profession do not just occur by accident or seem to appear overnight. ‘They are the result of hard work, careful planning, examination of strengths and weaknesses, and the provision of needed reinforcement at critical times’ (Sandeen & Barr 2006: 2).

The authors trace the development of a shared foundation for the student affairs profession in the USA with reference to its philosophical and theoretical foundations, organisational theories and implications for graduate preparation programmes. Given the diverse nature of student affairs and the fact that it is continuing to grow and evolve, multiple perspectives and theories should be encouraged. Two ‘enduring and distinctive concepts’ continue to form the foundation of the profession, namely ‘the consistent and persistent commitment to the development of the whole person’ and the fact that student affairs ‘support[s] the academic mission of the college’ (Sandeen & Barr 2006: 3).

Unlike the well-documented history of student affairs in the United States of America, which marks the profession’s development into becoming an integral part of higher education, South Africa lacks a significant library of evidence that traces the development of the profession. The volume edited by Martin Mandew, A Guide to Student Services in South Africa (2003) provides an important and crucial contribution in this regard. SAASSAP, representing student affairs professionals in most of the 23 public universities in South Africa, for example, has only been in
existence for a decade and a half. There is also currently an attempt to establish an umbrella body for the different national associations representing various sectors in student affairs and student development\(^1\). One of the main motivations for having such an umbrella body is to have a stronger voice and more coordination of associations, hopefully resulting in greater professionalisation and utilisation of resources, and ultimately a more efficient service delivery to students in all tertiary institutions. In addition, student affairs professionals are a very diverse group of people. Their role as professionals in their own right is also not always acknowledged within their respective institutions and the higher education sector in general. One common feeling among professionals and practitioners in student affairs is one of being the fire brigade that is called upon to extinguish or at least dampen student protest, with too little appreciation of the overall critical work being done consistently year in and year out.

There is a general sense that each institution treats student affairs according to local needs and challenges, with the result that no clear ‘South African’ model has emerged. This is evident in the titles of those who head divisions, departments or centres for student affairs. These range from executive director, dean of students to director, who may report directly to senior directors, or to the registrar or to a deputy vice-chancellor. Some are part of the institution’s top management, either as members or in an advisory capacity, while others report to a member of the management team.

Not all divisions (departments, centres) for student affairs are constituted in the same way, making benchmarking a difficult exercise. Student affairs professionals should lead the discussion regarding the placement of student affairs in the organisational structure ‘with vigour and forthrightness’ (Sandeen & Barr 2006: 30). They cannot leave it up to ‘those with little or no knowledge of, or commitment to student affairs’ to make decisions about the organisational status of student affairs. Student affairs practitioners have to guard against self-marginalisation. One sure way to ensure that student affairs practitioners are part of the conversations, deliberations and decision-making processes in their institutions is to adhere to one of the two ‘enduring and distinctive concepts’ referred to earlier, namely to ‘support the academic mission of the college’ (Sandeen & Barr 2006: 3). We are important stakeholders and partners driving one of the strategic objectives of institutions of higher learning: student success.

To a large extent, the work of student affairs practitioners is still seen as providing services that complement and facilitate the learning process (Hamrick, Evans & Shuh 2002: 113). However, this view should not be accepted as the last word on student affairs. Student learning outside the classroom is busy evolving ‘from a peripheral experience to a central part of the educational experience’
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(Hamrick, Evans and Shuh 2002: 113). The seminal work of Pascarella and Terenzini, *How College Affects Students* (1991), has played a major role in broadening our thinking about a total learning experience and the importance of systematically and purposefully integrating the students’ academic and social lives in order to enhance their learning. This broadened understanding of learning is articulated by Keeling (2004: 5) as follows: ‘Learning is a complex, holistic, multi-centric activity that occurs throughout and across the college experience.’ In this sense we speak about ‘co-curricular’, rather than ‘extra-curricular’ activities and learning opportunities, consciously shifting the focus of our role as student affairs practitioners from the margins to the centre. It implies combining activity (merely running around doing things and rendering services, which in any event remain an integral part of our work) with critical reflection, study and research. This will empower student affairs professionals and practitioners to provide important input into the institution’s strategic plans regarding curriculum development, community engagement, budget, facilities management, etc.

The various models for the organisation of student affairs will indeed continue to be debated. I agree with the assessment of Sandeen and Barr (2006: 48) that the most important issue for student affairs ‘is not where it is placed on the organizational chart, but how effective its leadership is on campus.’

Finding some common or shared foundation for student affairs in South Africa will be a critical step in helping to establish the profession. Mandew (2003: 21) rightfully postulates that right now there is ‘no overtly articulated philosophical framework or explicit theory that informs practice in the field of student services’ in South Africa. This is a huge challenge. Professionals in student affairs come from a diverse academic background (psychology, theology, education, etc.) and need to utilise their scientific knowledge to develop the necessary theoretical foundations for student affairs within the South African context.

Unlike the USA the field of student affairs in South Africa has not evolved to the level of being a formal academic discipline for qualification purposes. There have been some developments in this regard, with the University of the Western Cape (UWC) collaborating with the University of California Fullerton to design a PhD course, with the first student registering in 2011. The Southern African Chapter of the Association of College and University Housing Officers – International (ACUHO-I) has also recently started, with professional training courses for its members. It is encouraging that a number of colleagues in the field are busy with or completing doctoral studies that focus on student affairs. A greater emphasis is also placed on research papers, in addition to presentations on best practices at conferences. It is hoped that this will be beneficial and enriching, not only to the student affairs sector, but to higher education as well.
Mandew (2003: 21) proposes a ‘critical paradigm’ for student affairs which points in the direction of a foundational principle for the profession in South Africa. He asserts that student services practice in South Africa is largely influenced by ‘a de facto hybridisation of the inherited in loco parentis and intellectualist approaches’, lacking a common philosophical framework with an increasing tendency towards managerialism, rather than being education-orientated and development-focused. The challenge for student services practitioners, according to Mandew, ‘is to develop and maintain a healthy tension between the need for sound technical management driven by financial efficiencies and bottom-line priorities on one hand, and a progressive and creative student-centred and development-oriented focus driven by educational imperatives on the other’ (2003: 22).

The following elements are therefore of critical importance in the discussion about the foundation of the student affairs profession:

- Student affairs plays a fundamental role in the core function (academic mission) of higher education institutions, namely teaching and learning, research, and community engagement.
- Student affairs is best positioned to ensure that institutions fulfil their objective with regard to graduate attributes, ‘delivering’ the graduates that will make the best possible contribution to society. A key factor here is the intentional bringing together of the curricular (or in-class) learning and the co-curricular (out-of-class) learning to create a total learning experience for students. Student affairs practitioners should be experts in reading and interpreting matters and developments pertaining to the life and learning of students.
- Professional development of student affairs practitioners is a given. Taking into account that disciplines such as student counselling and health services have already established professional bodies, much more will have to be done in this regard.
- Developing a philosophical framework for student affairs in South Africa that undergirds the work of professionals and guide practitioners in the field is critical. This framework will draw from the global research and experience in the field, but will remain contextual.

The Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs, drawn up jointly by two North American associations – ACPA (American College Personnel Association) and NASPA (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators) in 1997 – emphasise the importance of context and the appreciation of the total life experience of students for practitioners:
Our history also reminds us that good student affairs practice must be considered within the context of issues that influence higher education and its missions. Societal concerns and needs, economic conditions, and external political agendas shape the parameters for student affairs work. These conditions emphasize the need for our practices to be informed by research and writing not only about teaching and learning but also concerning the most pressing issues confronting our students and their families. (ACPA 1997: 1)

The specific socio-political and economic context of South Africa provides the background for the discussion of a number of critical issues facing student affairs.

**The transformation agenda**

The dawn of a democratic dispensation in South Africa in 1994 presented the country with several daunting challenges, especially with regard to the tremendous levels of inequality that are still so pervasive in society. The process of transformation is hamstrung by factors like fiscal constraints, subjected to market volatilities, encumbered by political exigencies and ‘dampened by social sensitivities’ (Mandew 2003: 19). It is therefore not surprising that the ‘transformation agenda’ is a critical part of every plan and process within institutions, organisations and government departments. The Education White Paper 3 1997 entitled ‘A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education’ makes it clear that higher education ‘must contribute to and support the process of societal transformation, as outlined in the then Reconstruction and Development Programme’, which would lead to the building of a better quality of life for all. Higher education in South Africa undoubtedly has a responsibility to advocate for and cultivate democratic action. Universities are the places where students’ minds are shaped in preparation for enacting their responsibilities as citizens in a democratic society (Waghid 2010: 491). Furthermore, the correlation between excellence in education and training and high levels of economic growth resulting in significant improvements in the living standards of the masses of people is generally recognised (Council on Higher Education 2004: 14).

Firfirey and Carolissen (2010: 988) point out that the Ministerial Committee on Social Cohesion (2008) and the report on the Summit on Higher Education (2010) have documented how many of the challenges identified in the White Paper 3 of 1997 still remain in relation to race, gender and class. This corresponds with the general view about the progress we have made in South Africa as a
nation. The National Development Plan (NDP) (NPC 2011: 1) lists a number of achievements since 1994, such as the adoption of the Constitution, the establishment of institutions of democracy, the building of a non-racial and non-sexist public service, the restoration of the health of the public finances. It also declares that ‘democracy has not just restored the dignity of all South Africans – it has also translated into improved access to education, health services, water, housing, electrification and social security’. The NDP identifies pervasive poverty and high levels of inequality as the key challenges for the country, with millions of people remaining unemployed and many working households still living close to the poverty line. It proposes the writing of a new story for South Africa in which young people will have ‘the capabilities and confidence to grasp the opportunities of a brighter future (NPC 2011: 5). In this regard, education, training and innovation are central elements in eliminating poverty and reducing inequality. ‘Education empowers people to identify their identity, take control of their lives, raise healthy families, take part confidently in developing a just society, and play an effective role in the politics and governance of their communities’ (NPC 2011: 261). Universities are recognised as key to the development of a nation through education and training of people with high-level skills, producing new knowledge, and providing opportunities for social mobility and simultaneously strengthening equity, social justice and democracy (NPC 2011: 262).

As we move towards two decades of democracy under a majority government, universities in South Africa are indeed still struggling to clearly define their role in society, given the realities of ‘globalisation’ – ‘a meaningful integration of local and global dynamics’ (Brooks & Normore 2010: 53). On the one hand, the socio-economic realities of the majority of people still bear testimony to ‘deeply rooted and intractable historical inequalities’ (DHET 2011), access to higher education is still shockingly low, too many students entering universities are critically under-prepared, and funding for higher education is decreasing. Therefore, we still have major challenges in improving access and quality of education and educational outcomes. On the other hand, the demands of a globalised world are putting pressure on South Africa to produce graduates who will be able to compete with the best in the world. The isolation that South Africa experienced during the years of apartheid has also made way for a much more open society, both in terms of knowledge and the socio-political economy – we ‘see’ the world in our streets and on our campuses every day.

One of the biggest and most difficult challenges for us in South Africa since 1994 has been how to deal with our past, while simultaneously dealing with the demands of the ever-changing global world. How can we be active, serious players on the global scene, while meeting the real demands of creating a better life for all
citizens, especially those who had been disadvantaged under the apartheid system? A ‘greater understanding of globalization’ is indeed ‘relevant to the preparation and practice of contemporary educational leaders’ (Brooks & Normore 2010: 53). The transformation agenda should not be discarded in the name of seeking to be a world-class university, but these two facets should rather be seen as two sides of the same coin. Helping students develop holistically, overcoming socio-economic challenges that obstruct their learning, and increasing the number of more well-rounded graduates should be the singular objective of everyone involved in universities. Waghid therefore rightly posits that ‘higher education in South Africa has a responsibility to advocate for and cultivate democratic action’ (Waghid 2010: 491).

Waghid continues: ‘A university that abdicates its responsibility to educate for critical democratic education cannot be a university for the sole reason that it is disconnected from much-needed public change’ (2010: 491). Student affairs professionals are well placed to ensure the cultivation of ‘deliberative diverse spaces’ (Waghid 2010: 492) through courageous conversations and daring deliberations with the possibility of coming to something new. ‘A university that does not teach its students to deliberate undermines the very role of democratic education – that is, such a university fails to enact its responsibility towards nurturing a democratic society’ (Waghid 2010: 492). Practically all institutions have critical and engaged citizens as one of their graduate attributes, in other words, as a desired learning outcome. Universities present students with multiple opportunities ‘to exercise citizenship, empower themselves as citizens, and develop their citizen potential’ (Hamrick, Evans & Shuh 2002: 181). Student affairs practitioners could assist in ‘educating campus regarding the value of service learning, leadership development, and other experiences shown to contribute to citizen development’ (Hamrick, Evans & Shuh 2002: 207). Many students have to engage in these deliberative diverse spaces and take part in citizenship development as so-called ‘wounded healers’ who are themselves ‘vulnerable’ persons experiencing ‘perpetual institutional hegemonies of exclusion and marginalisation on the basis of race and class’, which does not do much to enhance students’ feeling of belonging (Waghid 2010: 492).

In the next section I discuss the impact of continuing societal inequalities, as evidenced in high levels of unemployment and poverty, on the general wellness of students in dealing with financial challenges and constraints.
Financial needs and challenges of students

South Africa has one of the world’s highest levels of inequality (NPC 2011: 3). Great poverty and great wealth co-exist side by side. It is therefore of the utmost importance that we actively create every opportunity to ensure that many more of those who currently or historically suffered from poverty and disadvantage are assisted to participate in the higher education sector. This is one of the main challenges for student affairs practitioners. For a majority of students, access and success are closely connected to the issue of finances. For the students to be accepted into university is just the first hurdle. Financial difficulty is seen as one of the key factors contributing to student attrition in South Africa, together with under-preparedness for higher education (Cosser & Letseka 2010: 3). In his foreword to the Student Housing Report, the minister of higher education and training emphasises the fact that ‘[M]any of our students, particularly those studying in our historically black institutions, have been living in very poor conditions and this has often hampered their ability to succeed’ (DHET 2011: xi).

Despite the fact that the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has been instrumental in increasing access for students who would otherwise have had no hope of obtaining tertiary education by providing financial aid to 659 000 students and distributing more than R12 billion in the first decade of its existence, the challenge has not been completely met (DHET 2010: 111). A number of academically deserving and financially needy students seem to be ‘falling through the cracks of the scheme’s bureaucracy’, with the DHET recognising that there may be a ‘bunching of students just beyond the cut-off point’ (Letseka, Breier & Visser 2010: 38). The decades of discriminatory provision under apartheid continue to haunt the education system, affecting the chances and success of black, particularly poor, students (Letseka, Breier & Visser 2010: 25). It is a tragic fact that many students, mainly black, drop out of university every year without a qualification and huge debt – in other words, worse off and poorer, and also ashamed to even return to their hometowns because they have not been successful. There are, of course, many reasons for this unacceptable situation. Part of the problem has to do with the fact that many of these students only have bursaries and loans as a source of finances for their studies, and in many cases the bursaries do not cover all the costs of studying, leaving them struggling to cope. They came to university hoping that tertiary education would set them free from the poverty they have known all their life, only to leave the university disillusioned, with broken spirits.
Firfirey and Carolissen (2010) point out how students use multiple strategies to disguise their poverty from others – they are literally being silenced by the stigma of poverty, with feelings of hopelessness, while at the same time aggravating the harsh burden that they carry. They internalise oppression and resign themselves to accepting it (2010: 995). If bursaries or loans do not cover all the costs of studying, many students struggle to buy class notes (readers), pay for transport to service learning sites, and consequently find it extremely difficult to remain in the system and be successful in their studies. Firfirey and Carolissen (2010: 1000) therefore argue for an inclusive fee structure with minimal additional costs for the student’s own pocket.

Student affairs practitioners see and know these ugly faces of poverty more than others on campus do. Many students feel safe enough to visit the offices of these practitioners. In many universities student affairs divisions have instituted various ways and means to at least alleviate the burden of financially challenged students through work-study programmes, assistantships and monthly supplies of basic toiletry items. Student affairs practitioners should continue to advocate a holistic integrated approach to student support and development. They are strategically well positioned to understand and appreciate the position of students and their struggles, and should therefore be the interpreters and advocates of student life and student issues. This implies an awareness that the six areas of wellness of students should be kept in mind, namely physical, spiritual, social, emotional, intellectual and occupational in a holistic, integrated and systemic approach (Cilliers 2008).

One way to ensure that their voice and the voices of students would be heard and taken seriously is to cultivate and develop strong ethical leadership among professionals and practitioners, as well as student leaders, increasing the credibility of the sector. Within the context of our current socio-political climate this is an extremely important part of restoring the moral fibre of the country and increasing confidence in leaders.

Cultivating and developing ethical leadership

Good student affairs practice provides opportunities for students, faculty staff, and student affairs educators to demonstrate the values that define a learning community. Effective learning communities are committed to justice, honesty,
equality, civility, freedom, dignity, and responsible citizenship. Such communities challenge students to develop meaningful values for a life of learning. Standards espoused by student affairs divisions should reflect the values that bind the campus community to its educational mission (ACPA & NASPA 1997).

It is important for us to not only focus on ethical leadership for and among students, but we also need to live and demonstrate ethical values in our own work and life. Learning indeed has a moral context and it is expected of an educated person ‘to possess certain traits of character, including the moral obligation to the common good’ (Dalton, 1999: 45). The national context dictates that we raise the importance of a focus on ethical leadership. The national government’s moral regeneration initiative has apparently come to a complete halt in some areas and so has the Western Cape joint initiative on ethical leadership. At the same time, levels of corruption have reached alarmingly high proportions, with obvious negative effects on the state’s service delivery capacities. Many other social ills could be ascribed to the deterioration of ethical values and, furthermore, a worrying general attitude of ‘Everyone is doing it’ and ‘I’ve got to look out for myself’ has become part of a general culture among people. The common good has too often made way for self-interest and self-oriented materialistic values. Although corruption is not just a post-1994 phenomenon in South Africa, we concur with the NDP in its insistence that there can be no excuses for corruption today (NPC 2011: 401). The NDP’s vision is ‘a South Africa which has zero tolerance for corruption, in which an empowered citizenry have the confidence and knowledge to hold public and private officials to account and in which leaders hold themselves to high ethical standards and act with integrity’ (NPC 2011: 402).

I believe universities are well-placed to – and should – take the lead to cultivate and develop ethical values in student leaders, preparing them to be change agents in society. Tertiary institutions occupy a position of privilege in society and it is not wrong that people expect high moral values from staff and students.

Dalton (1999: 51) suggests four ‘inescapable areas’ of student affairs practice that should help students to develop coherent moral values and ethical standards, namely ‘learn and practice academic integrity; live responsibly in the community; develop citizenship skills and commitment for life after college; and grow and learn from personal moral crises and ethical conflicts’. A supporting community can contribute substantially to the development of students’ values. Institutions should therefore be very clear regarding the values that they stand for. When students are confronted and challenged by the values and lifestyles of others, this encourages ‘and even demand[s] reflectiveness and re-examination’ of what they may know and believe (Dalton 1999: 55).
The way forward

The student affairs department within an institution committed to student learning and personal development should, according to *The Student Learning Imperative* (American College Personnel Association 1996), exhibit the following characteristics:

1. The student affairs department’s mission complements the institution’s mission, with the enhancement of student learning and personal development being the primary goal of student affairs programmes and services;
2. Resources are allocated to encourage student learning and personal development; and
3. Student affairs professionals collaborate with other institutional agents and agencies to promote student learning and personal development.

As learning is increasingly defined as more than classroom knowledge acquisition, student affairs units can claim a role in student learning that is neither peripheral nor optional. Student affairs can and should play an essential role ‘by creating and maintaining a learning environment that fosters and maximizes student learning’ (Hamrick, Evans & Shuh 2002: 126). This indeed has implications for restructuring student affairs practice and for preparing student affairs professionals and practitioners to play their crucial role in assuring highly educated and trained graduates who will be able to participate in the knowledge-driven economy of the future.

Some of the critical issues that were not discussed in this paper and which seem to be on the agenda at universities these days are the question of identity and culture, and the race issue. There are also questions around gender, sexuality and sexual practices that have to be debated in our multi-cultural society. Conversations around HIV/AIDS, internationalisation and xenophobia, should also form part of programmes and agendas. Student affairs professionals and practitioners cannot withdraw from these conversations, but should rather create safe spaces and forums to encourage discussion.

Note

1. Partners involved in the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International South Africa Chapter (ACUHO-I SAC), Financial Aid Practitioners of South Africa (FAPSA), Higher Education Disability Services Association (HEDSA), National Association of Student Development Officers (NASDEV), the Southern Africa Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP), the Southern African Association for Counselling and Development in Higher Education (SAACDHE) and the South African Association of Campus Health Services (SAACHS).