

PREFACE

Together in student success

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I have had two opportunities to visit South Africa in the past several years and interact with student affairs staff, as well as faculty and students, at a number of universities, including Stellenbosch University, the University of Cape Town, the University of the Western Cape and the University of Pretoria. The prevailing themes of my visits have been the exceptional hospitality that has been extended to me, the wonderful discussions we have had about higher education in South Africa, the United States and other countries around the world, and the enthusiasm for knowledge that has marked our conversations. I have learnt so much from my colleagues in South Africa and often have felt as though I might not have been able to reciprocate to the extent that I had wished. My learning and perspectives have been expanded so much by my interaction with my colleagues in South Africa.

It can be easy to slip into conversations about how higher education is different from country to country if one brings a nationalistic perspective to international exchanges. After traveling outside the US to countries on four continents to visit institutions of higher education, I am convinced that we as student affairs educators have more in common than we have differences. For example, “[p]roblems and challenges that student affairs professionals face in the United States are common around the world” (Jones, Harper & Schuh, 2011, p. 538). Of course, there are structural differences in our institutions, our central governments play very different roles in supporting and overseeing our institutions, we use different nomenclature, and our histories and cultures are different. But I would submit that our similarities override those differences. For example, consider the following similarities:

Our countries have high expectations for those in higher education to contribute to the general welfare of our citizenry (Churchill, 2014). In my view this means that there is general agreement that for those people who seek to improve their station in life, securing the highest level of education is the surest means of doing so. Advanced levels of education do not necessarily ensure that one’s life will be easy or without challenges, but the evidence across the world is that educated people lead more robust and fulfilling lives than those who are not fortunate enough to have had opportunities for advanced education, or who have had such opportunities and failed to take advantage of them.

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Our institutions have the success of their students as a core value (for more on student success, see Kuh, 2011). Some institutions will emphasise research and scholarly activity more than others, but it is very difficult to find a university that is not concerned about the success of its students. The days of ignoring undergraduate students and leaving their learning to chance are over. Rather, institutions around the world are identifying and implementing strategies to provide an environment where students can be successful. Of course, students need to take advantage of the support and assistance that are available, but in the end the focus on student success has never been greater.

Our institutions, across the world, are held to increasingly high standards of accountability (Blimling, 2013). Governments, governing boards, families, students and others are interested in the extent to which our institutions are accomplishing their missions. In short, our various stakeholders want to know if institutions are using their resources wisely, and that the use of those resources is resulting in organisational success, be that the accomplishment of educational goals by our students, the discovery and advancement of knowledge through the use of our research assets, or the advancement of our larger societies by the work that is undertaken with communities outside of higher education. Accountability, transparency, and a commitment to continuous improvement are watchwords of contemporary higher education, and there is no reason to believe that this will change in the foreseeable future.

Interest in the contributions of student affairs educators to the education of our students also is a similarity. In most cases with which I am familiar, those who perform the typical functions found in student affairs have moved beyond conceptualising their roles as providing well-managed services for students. Well-managed services for students certainly are important, but the learning that results from students living in campus residences, performing volunteer service, participating in campus organisations and recreational experiences, and studying abroad is perceived as central to the out-of-class experience. Measuring this learning, adding potency to experiences, and creating new opportunities are all part of the portfolio of student affairs educators (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2010; also see Gansemer-Topf, 2013). Work will always need to be done in determining how to add value to student learning, but a firm foundation has been established.

All of this, then, brings us to the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*. In my view there is no better way of advancing a profession than through the development of literature that is carefully reviewed, timely, and disseminated widely among potential readers (also see Carpenter & Haber-Curran, 2013). That is the aim of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, and my view is that it is well on its way towards making major contributions to advancing student affairs in Africa and around the world.

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