

BOOK REVIEW

**Speckman, M. & Mandew, M. (Eds.) (2014). *Perspectives on Student Affairs in South Africa*
Cape Town: African Minds**

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There is an aphorism that I often share with my students, as Dean of Students at the University of Zimbabwe, which quickly came to my mind as I read *Perspectives on Student Affairs in South Africa*. The aphorism says, “Every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up, it knows it must run faster than the fastest lion or it will be killed. Every morning a lion wakes up it knows it must outrun the slowest gazelle or it will starve to death. It doesn’t matter whether you are a lion or a gazelle ... when the sun comes up, you better be running.” This aphorism is used to assure students that the student affairs division is there to support them in all their noble and constructive endeavours; and that their success, whether ‘running away from danger’ or ‘running after prey’ is our ultimate goal. Consistent with this aphorism as it applies at the University of Zimbabwe, *Perspectives on Student Affairs in South Africa* is a comprehensive exposé of the broad scope of how universities can create, facilitate and advance opportunities for student growth and success in South Africa.

This volume of articles from seasoned and well-accomplished South African student affairs practitioners is a must-read for student affairs practitioners, heads of colleges and universities, scholars and researchers in the area of higher education. The volume has eight well-researched and painstakingly written articles, paying rapt attention on student affairs practices in South Africa, invariably comparing and contrasting these with best practices elsewhere in the developed and developing countries.

Perspectives on Student Affairs in South Africa is a remarkable demonstration of absolute limits of excellent research, mastery and specialisation in the student affairs discourse, a passion for the profession, and an insatiable knowledge-based zeal to see student affairs transformed into a vehicle of not only student growth, but also for the development of Africa. The clarion call that echoes through and transverse the whole volume is the need for a proper understanding of the place and role of student affairs, its philosophical foundations in education, which then inform the ethos and practices in student affairs, as well as its possible professionalisation. Student affairs management efficiency, effectiveness and relevance in pursuit of student development and success receive appropriate attention in the volume.

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What makes this work great reading for all student affairs practitioners and educational administrators is that it is written by scholars and student affairs practitioners who come from a complex and fascinating working environment: South Africa. This is a country that has a fair share of socio-economic and political dynamics with a very high propensity to keep student affairs practitioners busy. Dynamics in South Africa require student affairs practitioners that are creative, innovative and inventive. South African universities' catchment areas for students are characterised by interesting bipolar extremes: peace and violence, opulence and poverty, health and pandemics, social systems breakdown against a backdrop of the first world in sections of society, etc. South Africa boasts of some of the best universities on the continent, yet it also has universities that Julius Malema labeled "glorified high schools". The "rainbow" nature of South Africa also poses serious cultural challenges to student affairs practitioners because it is not always easy to come up with a student affairs model and intervention strategies that can satisfy the diversity of cultures therein. Handling student affairs issues in a country where violence has become endemic and drug abuse prevalent is not a stroll in the park. This background makes *Perspectives on Student Affairs in South Africa* imperative. And the authors do not disappoint.

Among the major issues articulated in *Perspectives on Student Affairs in South Africa*, the need for a clear philosophical framework for student affairs is one of the highlights. It is true that without clear metaphysical, epistemological and theoretical foundations underpinning the ethos and practices of student affairs, it is difficult to even conceptualise and articulate the institutional vision, mission, values and mandates. Benchmarks and outcomes of educational goals in general and student affairs in particular have to be informed by the institution's philosophy of education. The lack of a normative metaframework for student affairs, which is not peculiar to South Africa alone, creates a plethora of challenges. As Birgit Schreiber rightly notes, the lack of a proper philosophical foundation for student affairs leads to a lot of second order-level problems. Without an appreciation of the philosophical and educational foundations of student affairs, it is hardly possible for macrolevel administrators in educational institutions to adequately plan and budget for student affairs-related issues. Deployment of adequate and appropriately qualified human resources to student affairs is also highly unlikely when top administration does not understand the role, place and significance of student affairs.

The volume, however, rightly concedes that, as much as we want clear philosophical foundations for student affairs, it is not always easy to have a universally accepted position on what constitute educational goals, values and best practices. The work under review posits that failure to reflect on local best practices or produce new knowledge can open up gaps for the proliferation of foreign models and theories of student affairs management. Reflection on this aspect as presented in the work under review shows that cultural diversity in a "rainbow nation" like South Africa, can lead to paradigm paralysis and/or ambivalence in student affairs. Cultural relativism, a view that "moral or ethical appropriateness of a belief or practice depends on cultural contexts", has serious implications for many aspects in student affairs. For example, the cross-gender student housing model in South Africa, America, Europe and Australia would not appeal to strongly conservative countries like Zimbabwe and Botswana. Counselling, therapy and a host of student advisory services are

new to some parts of Africa, and students sometimes shun them because, culturally, seeking therapy is a sign of weakness, especially to a man. More work needs to be done on these culturally specific, sensitive issues with the view to engendering tolerance and adaptability, if we are to achieve the goal of nurturing global citizens through education.

Another area of utmost importance raised in the volume is the issue of student governance. The question as to whether universities are doing enough to nurture student leaders is pertinent. Are institutions happy with the emerging of prolific, dynamic and critical student leaders? Are legal frameworks and ordinances for student conduct designed to promote growth or to stifle student development? Can student politics be divorced from national politics? Do we have good examples for our students who can provide examples and benchmarks for democratic leadership in Africa and beyond? Can African students admire and/or adopt Western democracy without their leaders accusing them of succumbing to neo-colonialism? It is not only in South Africa that such questions are raised and where relationships between administrators and students may come to be characterised by suspicion, malice, vengeance and contempt. Student leadership and student governance require more attention because this is where the future leadership of nations is nurtured.

The volume also alludes to three phases of development in student affairs, i.e. the *parenting phase*, the *student development phase* and the *integrated support phase*. In my view, the “integrated support phase” needs greater attention in many African institutions because this is the model closest to many philosophies of education, be they African, European, American or Asian. Several features are common about education regardless of background, but the following tend to be very conspicuous when we look at the philosophy of student affairs: firstly, that education is a value-laden, axiological concept; and secondly that students tend to take the character traits and value systems of their professors (people that they admire) and those who spend a lot of time with them. Martin Mandew’s calls for collaboration and cooperation between academics can, therefore, not be overemphasised. I fully agree with the notion that there is a very thin line between the academic development and the social development of students. Classical philosophers and educational sociologists such as Socrates and Immanuel Kant, and contemporary scholars such as Richard S. Peters, Lawrence Kohlberg and Jean Piaget, present compelling arguments to the effect that intellectual and social development take place concurrently.

Another message that comes out strongly in this volume concerns the need to come up with relevant student affairs methodologies that respond to the needs of certain specific conditions and cultures. There is a strong argument for home-grown resources for counsellors to “strike the right code”. The volume also rightly advocates the need to design systems, mechanisms and strategies for specific target groups, appreciating that “human behaviour is often influenced by material conditions in a given environment”. What this then means is that student affairs practitioners at universities like Stellenbosch and those at the University of the Limpopo may need to vary their approaches and contents of student development. For example, the range of lifeskills and soft skills required by students at these two institutions may differ quite significantly because the areas of focus and levels of engagement will differ depending on students’ needs and past experiences.

Another talking point raised in this work is the issue of synergies, not only between student affairs and academics, but also with other institutions designated for youth development. In the case of Zimbabwe where I come from, we have organs such as the Zimbabwe Youth Council; the Ministry of Youth, Gender and Indigenisation; the National Youth Service, etc. The question here is, “How does the national youth development policy influence student affairs development in universities? How are student affairs practitioners influencing national youth development policies?” The need for student affairs practitioners to spread their wings wider cannot be overemphasised.

The issues of material support to, and access into, universities by people from poor and disadvantaged areas are areas of serious debate especially in developing countries. Apart from grappling with issues of paternalism, dependency and entitlement, there are also issues of dehumanisation, confidence and self-efficacy. What intervention strategies are necessary and effective for students who survive through university on handouts? Does the quality of handout really matter to students who have no options? How should a government disburse resources to underprivileged students where there is no accurate means test? Do students on government support have any obligation to the state upon completion? Are governments that benefit from poor countries’ brain drain obliged to compensate the country of origin for the investment made in the graduates?

Perspectives of Student Affairs in South Africa is a must-read. Its literary impact will certainly be felt as it makes its way into libraries and offices of student affairs practitioners. Authors and editors of this volume deserve commendation and appreciation for a job well done. Their efforts have gone a long way in expanding frontiers of knowledge in this area where not much research has been carried out.