

BOOK REVIEW

***Engaging Students: Using Evidence to Promote Student Success* by F. Strydom, G. Kuh & S. Loots (Eds.) (2017).  
Bloemfontein, South Africa: Sun Media.**

Reviewed by Birgit Schreiber\*

This book has been one of my favourites since it was published in 2017, and I have recently taken it out of the shelf again when I was reminded by Prof. George Kuh as keynote speaker during the Stellenbosch University Experiential Education Conference that indeed we should engage our students at every turn in their academic career at university. George Kuh has inspired a generation of Student Affairs practitioners with what now seems intuitive, common sense and obvious: engaged students do better.

The book *Engaging Students: Using Evidence to Promote Student Success*, edited by Francois Strydom, George Kuh and Sonia Loots, uses evidence powerfully to support the notion that we should rely on evidence to support student success. As a whole, it offers a comprehensive view on student engagement in South Africa and elsewhere, and argues cogently that evidence-based decision-making yields good results, reliably. Each chapter brings a unique argument, context and lens to the engagement discourse. I will highlight some of the gems the book offers, but want to assert that each chapter makes an actionable, valuable and insightful contribution to our knowledge on student engagement in South Africa and beyond.

Strydom and Foxcroft argue in Chapter 2 that, together with institutional data, student engagement – the focus on what *students* do – can illuminate some of the questions around social cohesion that the higher education sector has been grappling with. In Chapter 5, Loots, Kinzie and Oosthuysen examine the notion of high impact practices (HIPs) and unpack the conceptualisations underpinning these. They raise some concerns around equitable participation in these, which is also an issue raised by others, including Carolissen (2014) who emphasises the importance of access, participation and inclusion of all groups of students in HIPs if we are to achieve equitable outcome and a context that enables all students an equal opportunity to flourish.

Coates and Radloff, Chapter 6, discuss the value of using engagement data to shift institutional practices and to leverage change. Their chapter concludes with emphasising that “engagement is an inherently contextualised phenomenon” (p. 145), prophetically heralding the shift to open online education, as we have seen recently due to the corona

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crisis, and suggest that engagement discourse needs to be continuously reconceptualised, attuned to local institutional cultures and practices. Torres and Madiba in Chapter 7 place Student Affairs in the central role in advancing engagement opportunities and propose a model that positions Student Affairs as active roleplayer in shifting student success by intentional promotion of student engagement spaces. Kinzie, Strydom and Loots in Chapter 9 discuss the pedagogical shifts required to consider how students experience the learning process and, like Strydom, Hen-Boisen, Kuh and Loots in the following two chapters, call for the re-examination of classroom pedagogies to put the student learning *experience* at the centre.

Each chapter offers actionable, relevant and locally embedded data that underpin the argument that student engagement promotes student success. What is missing, in my view, is a more critical examination of the implicit assumptions that engagement is driven by institutional processes in institution-centric ways. Moreover, I would have liked a discussion of the critiques that are often raised, including arguments that engagement favours those students who have capacity to engage in institutionally designed opportunities (Trowler & Schreiber, 2020). These critiques aside, the book is a comprehensive status report on what student engagement research can offer universities when re-imagining themselves as communities of learning that offer opportunities for equitable participation in the learning process.

It is a must-read for Student Affairs practitioners, not only in Africa, but in all contexts that seek to offer teaching and learning opportunities that advance equitable participation in the learning process.

## ***References***

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