

GUEST EDITORIAL

Embracing SAASSAP Scholarship

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This issue was initiated as part of an effort to raise the level of scholarship within the South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP). It was conceptualised in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. As guest editor, I had a number of opportunities to engage with members and associates of the SAASSAP throughout the process of compiling and finalising this issue. A key moment of engagement was when the association undertook an “identity check”, to reflect on who we are as SAASSAP members. The pandemic provided a time to be contemplative about our work.

The “P” at the end of the SAASSAP acronym stands for “professional” as well as “practitioner”. The Collins Dictionary defines a practitioner as “a person engaged in the practice of a profession”¹. A practitioner is someone who has learned about and is actively working in their field. Carpenter and Haber-Curran (2013) raise a critical question in their argument for what they call a “scholarship of practice” for student affairs professionals. They ask: “What if student affairs professionals fully embraced a role as practitioner-scholars engaging in practice in a thoughtful and intentional way that is both informed by research and informs research?” (Carpenter & Haber-Curran, 2013). The point being that student affairs practitioners should fully embrace their roles as professionals, as practitioners and as scholars. For SAASSAP members, there is also a leadership component that is embedded in the role since this is an association for senior practitioners who would largely be in leadership positions in their institutions. Komives et al. (2005) argues for leadership capacity and an identity that is created and developed over time. It is this type of identity that SAASSAP members should assume – an identity that embraces the professional-practitioner-scholar-leader role.

If members of the association are to embrace such an identity, which includes the role of scholar, they must then ask: How do scholars work and what do they do? A related question is: Is there a difference between research and scholarship or between researchers and scholars? A CQUniversity of Australia YouTube video,² which describes what scholars do, says that scholars work in a “systematic, rational, balanced, evidence-based way” and through “a systematic process of framing questions and providing

1 <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/practitioner>

2 <https://www.youtube.com/@CQUniversityOLTV>

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answers”. In this regard, it should be noted that there is no definite distinction between research and scholarship: the two are closely related.

Huenemann (2014) argues for a distinction between research and scholarship on the basis of disciplinary differences. He associates research with experiments, “finding new stuff, unknown correlations and or causal connections”, and argues that “humanists are not in that kind of business”. He further posits (emphasis added): “To be a humanist scholar, one needs to *read a great deal*, think deeply and humanely about it, and pick up on *interesting patterns* or glaring exceptions to patterns commonly thought to exist. It is rare to find such scholars” (Huenemann, 2014).

Huenemann’s argument in seeking to differentiate between research and scholarship indicates how narrow the distinction can be. Against this background, a number of key identifying features are ascribed in the literature to the practice of scholarship. Scholars read, and read a lot, to acquire knowledge about their field of practice (Huenemann, 2014). I would further argue that they reference their work as they share and publish it. They apply their acquired knowledge to their practice and by so doing continuously improve their practice. They read classics in their field, as well as newly published works. In addition, scholars are mindful about how old their citations are when they are working towards publication, whether in the form of a thesis or an article in a journal.

I want to argue that scholars read for confirmation, confrontation, contradiction, challenge, and critique, and that these are the “Five Cs” of scholarship. Scholars read to confirm the observations they make and the trends they have noticed. They read to confront their own biases, beliefs, judgements, and subjectivities. They read to address the contradictions they have identified in their work and the work of other scholars. They read to deal with the challenges with which their practice is confronted. They read to critique their own practices and opinions; to critique other scholars; and to enable their institutions to engage in institutional self-critique.

Universities in South Africa are challenged to place transformation high on their agendas. In this regard, the journey towards a transformative turn starts with self-critique. Student affairs practitioners should not shy away from being at the centre of such an agenda, helping their institutions to change and acting as agents of the transformation process. Professional-practitioner-scholar-leaders are required to assume such agency in a meaningful way. Grappling with the nationwide student revolt of 2015, Booyesen (2016, p. 2) cites the work of Achille Mbembe (2016) who notes that “we have to find for ourselves the vocabulary” and engage in “the task of naming and elucidation”, and work our way towards a “sympathetic critique” to deal with the turmoil that might continue for a while in South African universities. Though Mbembe argues for “sympathetic critique”, what South African higher education institutions need more is self-critique. In this context, student affairs practitioner-scholars should engage their university communities and lead the way towards the processes of elucidation and the creation of vocabularies for self-critique, as advocated by Mbembe, in and outside the classroom and at the executive levels of these institutions.

Scholars engage in scholarship. Neuman (1993) argues that to differentiate between scholarship and research is like “walking in a semantic minefield”. She describes scholarship as an activity that updates or maintains the knowledge of an individual or adds to their skills and experience. She further describes scholarship as the manner of pursuing a serious, sustained line of enquiry, and as entailing the dissemination of findings. In a research project, as part of which she interviewed senior academics and administrators, she makes a distinction between two ideas of scholarship, that is, “the role of scholarship in providing the context for research”; and “scholarship as a far broader notion than research, spanning the entire endeavor of academic work”. Her analysis is worth quoting at length:

[Scholarship] is both preliminary to, and simultaneous with, research. Scholarship is part of the whole process of the asking and answering of questions – enquiry – in seeking to understand a particular field of study. In doing so, there has to be theoretical and conceptual understanding of the area of knowledge being investigated. Scholarship involves the ability “to glean information” and to respond critically to what has already been done in the field. This encompasses digesting and appraising what is already known, as a result of which the gaps in knowledge can be clearly perceived and appropriate questions of enquiry asked. Indeed, scholarship necessitates placing one’s own research within the existing knowledge of the field. The result is “research in context”. (Neuman, 1993)

Neumann (1993) further posits that scholarship entails greater contemplation and reflection than research. She notes that her interviewees asserted that the distinction between research and scholarship was less clear in the humanities, with some extending this view to the social sciences and professional areas. The participants in her research described “poor research” as “research without scholarship” (Neuman, 1993). She concludes her paper by arguing that research and scholarship are interrelated and yet separate, and that scholarship is broader than research, “encompassing aspects of research as well as relating to other areas of academic investigation” (Neuman, 1993). Her research confirms that academic enquiry is central to both research and scholarship. In this context, academic enquiry is described as a critical reflection on existing knowledge and a desire to ask unanswered questions.

In a report entitled “Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate”, Boyer (1990) describes four kinds of scholarship: the scholarship of discovery; the scholarship of integration; the scholarship of application; and the scholarship of teaching. For Boyer (1990, p. 16) it was time to define “what it means to be a scholar” and to recognise “the great diversity of functions higher education must perform”. This remains true for student affairs practitioners today. Student affairs practitioners must contend with what it means to be a scholar in their roles within a higher education system that faces many challenges. Over the years, Boyer’s views on scholarship have received a lot of attention and have contributed to a growing Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) movement, which has its own conferences and journals and which produces its own research alongside an existing “pure” form of research which Boyer categorises as the

scholarship of discovery. The influence of SoTL has now become so great that student affairs practitioners who fail to position themselves as active participants within this field of scholarship are liable to find themselves on the academic periphery.

Meanwhile, Carpenter and Haber-Curran (2013) argue for a fifth type of scholarship which they call “the scholarship of practice”. They identify 11 core values that are associated with and could constitute a scholarship of practice. In their suggested vision, such a scholarship should be: (1) intentional; (2) theory-based; (3) data-based; (4) peer-reviewed; (5) tolerant of differing perspectives; (6) collaborative; (7) unselfish; (8) open to change; (9) careful and sceptical; (10) attentive to regeneration; and (11) autonomous within institutional contexts. The authors offer these values as they reflect on a call for “student affairs and academic affairs professionals to unite in service of facilitating student development and learning” (Carpenter & Haber-Curran, 2013). The question remains whether it is necessary to think of a fifth type of scholarship as Carpenter and Haber-Curran (2013) propose – that is, a scholarship of practice – or whether the call should be to embrace the scholarship of integration identified by Boyer (1990).

The notion of a scholarship of integration becomes more critical and relevant considering the silos that have been built within higher education institutions and how these silos can stifle the work that is undertaken to advance student success. I argue elsewhere (Madiba, 2014) that student success is and should be the number one priority of student affairs work. A recent report from The Chronicle of Higher Education (2022, p. 1) argues that “as more colleges seek to raise graduation and retention rates, it has become clear that to make meaningful strides in student success, they must look at the *whole student*” (emphasis added). I have continued to argue in various recent engagements that the notion of looking at “the whole student” provides a valuable critique of the “single-axis framework” (Crenshaw, 1991) which dominates many student success interventions and the siloed approaches that accompany them at higher education institutions. I argue that “indicators of student success and the quality of ‘graduatedness’, like all the other indicators, is as much a matter of the classroom as it is of organised student life outside the classroom” (Madiba, 2014, p. 59). I further argue that “there is a need for a deliberate, concerted, and collective effort by all role-players in order to achieve student success” (Madiba, 2014, p. 59). With another author, I argue that “curriculum learning, academic development and student affairs need to combine forces and share expertise and resources to optimise students’ chances of success” (Torres & Madiba, 2017, p. 161).

The partitions that continue to be erected between what are described as the “academic” and “non-academic” aspects of higher education institutions create further barriers to student success, when the goal should be to remove such barriers. The building of such walls prevents student from being seen as whole beings. In this context, interventions become fragmented, structures work in silos and student affairs practitioners deal superficially with the challenges that threaten student success. However, the theoretical and conceptual understandings that may emerge from a scholarship of integration would allow student affairs practitioners to forge necessary

partnerships across disciplinary, functional and structural boundaries and deal with these challenges.

Much has been written about the challenges that students experienced during COVID-19, including in relation to their mental health. In fact, many of these challenges existed prior to pandemic outbreak, but in a less visible form, or were not previously taken seriously. COVID-19 “visibilised” them. Czerniewicz et al. (2020) assert that the pandemic as a crisis “has made it impossible not to recognise the historical, geospatial, economic inequalities of the country and the world students live in”. They further assert that “the pandemic, and the pivoting to online made visible, the invisible”. The authors are worth quoting at length as they describe how the pandemic led to a push for integration, where previously there had been none, or at least too little:

During this period, *fields of practice and scholarship*, which had previously intersected *far less* than one would have imagined, are now thrust together. The scholarship has drawn on different theoretical sources. The practice has been supported institutionally in different ways, either centrally or distributed. Historically, questions of access to and success in education were *the purview* of “academic development”, while the digital divide and digital inequalities fell in the parallel realm of “educational technology”. These *separations* have been shown to be impossible, with Student Affairs thrown into the mix as students demand that #NoStudentIsLeftBehind (emphasis added). (Czerniewicz et al., 2020)

Though it appears that greater attention has been paid to the pedagogies of care and compassion in academia, or at least in some parts of academia, it is a concern that much thinking remains siloed and that the need to forge partnerships that may advance the culture of care in the academy persists. In this context, Brodie et al. (2022) argue:

Given that *the culture of the academy* has been that such support has not usually been a primary focus of lecturers, we argue for *better integration of student support services into the core academic project within the broader institution*. In decentering this key structural and cultural element of the university space, this article has shown that we can support multiple opportunities for students to engage with disciplinary knowledge and that we can enable *care and concern* to be integrated into higher education pedagogy and thus become a stronger cultural element of teaching and learning in our institutions (emphasis added). (Brodie et al., 2020).

Brodie et al. (2022) call for integration. A scholarship of integration needs to be promoted if student support services practitioners are to be considered as equal partners with lecturers and in order to forge the partnerships that are required to advance a culture of care within the academy. In addition, a new class of “scholarly practitioners” will need to be established: a class who by their craft make “decisions primarily for the benefit of students, relying upon theory and research, remaining accountable to peers, providing professional feedback, acting ethically, and enacting the values of the profession generally”; a class of scholarly practitioners whose members continuously “exercise professional judgment”, as argued by Carpenter and Haber-Curran (2013).

Accordingly, I and a fellow author have posed the question (Madiba & Mathekga, 2018): “How well are we able to name and frame the problems students face as they enter and proceed through their studies in higher education?” Mathekga and I have further argued that the “question should be extended to the policies, interventions and solutions that are put in place to support students throughout their academic journey”. The broader argument being made here is that student affairs practitioners deal with complex and highly challenging problems that are systemic in nature and deeply entrenched. If they are to make any inroads, they need to demolish the walls separating functions and structures at universities. For this to happen, student affairs practitioners should seek to advance the scholarship of integration.

The call for papers for this issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa (JSAA)* was made within this context of asking whether SAASSAP members have acquired the identity of scholars who undertake their work in a systematic, evidence-based way, and whether they are able to frame the relevant questions and explore the resulting answers in a meaningful way. The theme that accompanied the call was: “Leading through Covid-19: The impact of the pandemic on student affairs and student services at South African universities.” Under lockdown, when there were few opportunities to meet face-to-face, two webinars were organised to support those considering responding to the call for papers. The first webinar on “writing for publication” was led by Birgit Schreiber and Siseko Kumalo. The second webinar on “writing for *JSAA*” was led by three well-published authors, Thierry Luescher, Laura Czerniewicz and Dantew Teferra, who shared the tools of the trade. Laura, who made a presentation on collaborative writing at the meeting, published her notes as a blog post,³ in which she advised: “Keep everything transparent, be organised, give and take feedback respectfully, be open minded, be flexible and be clear.”

The response to the first call for papers was encouraging. Twenty-four abstracts from eight different institutions were submitted. Finally, eight papers were submitted and sent for peer review. During this process, a number of challenges were identified. For example, it became clear that student affairs practitioners who are immersed in student-life activities and related crises may be hard-pressed to find the time to write for publication. In this regard, it would have been ideal to organise research retreats in support of this issue’s call for papers. The authors who answered the call for papers also faced the challenge of their relative scholarly inexperience. In this regard, there is a great need for student affairs practitioners to be supported in developing the skills that are required to write for publication if they are to make advances in scholarship and research. Student affairs and services (SAS) practitioners need to be encouraged to initiate sustainable collaborative research projects which can simultaneously inform policy and practice. Such projects should be undertaken in collaboration with other academics and with master’s and doctoral students within and across institutions, both locally and internationally. Ethical clearance poses another a challenge. It can take a

3 <https://czernie.weebly.com/blog/writing-collaboratively>

relatively long time to obtain, which can disrupt the writing, paper-submission and publication schedule. In this regard, there must be more support within institutions to establish and implement clear, transparent and workable ethical-clearance protocols and procedures. More generally, SAS practitioners should organise and participate in reading groups and book clubs at which book reviews may be presented to advance the Five Cs of scholarship. In addition, SAASSAP should periodically and continuously organise and plan for special journal issues and book projects.

The scope for collaborative scholarship projects in the field of student affairs and services is wide and practitioners are spoiled for choice as the 2021 SAASSAP conference, which can be a platform for the advancement of scholarship within the SAS community, demonstrated. The theme of the conference was: “Ramping up engaged scholarship, gender equity, and enhancing leadership in student affairs practice”. Presentations at the conference provided convincing evidence that, indeed, the scope for scholarship in this field is wide and that there is ample room for collaboration. Presentations were made on a range of topics, including, “exploring humanising practices and humanising scholarship”; using Photovoice to document and reflect on reality; curating experiences using the camera lens; student leadership and governance; and community and civic engagement. Research into such topics indicates the viability and broadness of the scope for collaborative projects and for longitudinal multi- and trans-disciplinary research. Engagement in such research allows for the creation of a communal space to explore and share methodologies and resources to advance scholarship.

The future of higher education will look far brighter if SAS practitioners can continue to forge partnerships and advance the scholarship of integration. In this way, they can make room to assert their place in academia; acquire their identity as professional-practitioner-scholar-leaders; and fully assume their roles as agents of transformation within their institutions.

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