GUEST EDITORIAL

Advancing the scholarship of integration for impactful, sustainable and holistic student success

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University professional and teaching staff are like two sides of the same coin. However, to a great extent, they work in silos – which leads to fragmentation and undermines efforts to achieve significant levels of impactful, sustainable and holistic student success. In this context, this special issue was proposed as a contribution towards closing the gap between the academic part of the university and the professional or support-services part; and as a means of encouraging the work required to forge integrated approaches in support of enhanced student success. The siloed approach, which is indicative of the politics and potential power dynamics that are embedded in university operations and structures, needs to be dismantled.

Historically, the formal teaching of students at universities is expected to take place within academic departments, which are also charged with the production of research outputs. However, over time, many universities have come to recognise that, in the pursuit of student success, equal importance should be attached to student development outside the formal classroom. In this regard, the task of improving the 'big rates' relating to student enrolment, retention, progression and completion is clearly a highly complex one. There are multiple factors at play. Madiba and Mathekga (2018, p. 162) cite an argument made by Crenshaw (1989) as they warn against a failure to embrace "the complexity of compoundedness". The authors argue that "it is important to recognise the complexity and the multiplicity of the factors that constitute the challenges faced by students throughout their studies" (Madiba & Mathekga, 2018, p. 150). Accordingly, there is a need to establish and foster linkages and partnerships across the different roles that academic, professional and support-services staff assume. To this end, professional and support-services staff should find their academic space by participating in the core university function of research and scholarship as they conceptualise, design and implement student success programmes (Huenemann, 2014). Equally, 'academics' should find their place by contributing towards the development of graduate attributes and critical skills among their students. In other words, there must be greater integration

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of efforts across the university if student success is to be improved. Meanwhile, working in silos will only undermine such efforts and render them less impactful.

The scholarship of integration (SOI) is becoming increasingly critical and relevant to the development of higher education institutions (Madiba, 2022). Boyer (1990, p. 7) coined the term 'scholarship of integration', describing it as "doing research at the boundaries where fields converge". The approach promotes "interdisciplinary, interpretive and integrative" work that can lead to a dramatic reshaping of the boundaries of human knowledge. The scholarship of integration, according to Boyer (1990), promises to enhance the meaning of the work undertaken at the university through multidisciplinary, integrated and evidence-based approaches. An engaged, multidisciplinary scholarship of integration holds the promise of aligning the disparate parts of traditional student affairs and student development theory and may also challenge traditional teaching to foster holistic student learning and development (Torres et al., 2019).

For this special issue, the aim was to pull together work from across the academic spectrum. In this respect, the editorial team for this issue is an ideal mix: it includes academic and 'professional services' staff from a number of universities. This partnership among academic and professional staff is meant to exemplify what may be achieved when linkages are forged and there is collaboration to integrate efforts. In this context, integration refers to academics and professional student-services staff working in partnership to advance scholarship and student success. Through the scholarship of integration, it is hoped that new, innovative methods and approaches will be discovered that will lead to the achievement of long-lasting and impactful change at South African universities. The prime time that students spend at the university should be a period of immense growth and development. It should prepare students to take on the many challenges that societies face. The scholarship of integration offers a new hope of breaking through the barriers that currently limit the impact of efforts towards student success and student development.

It is recognised that the challenges faced are not confined to silos and a lack of integration. Gilbert and Burden (2022) describe a range of barriers that stand in the way of student affairs practitioners and how these barriers make it difficult for practitioners to fully engage in scholarship. The barriers include: a lack of interest in and demand for scholarship produced by these practitioners; a lack of time and support; unreasonable work expectations; inadequate academic preparation; a lack of institutional and supervisor support; and a lack of motivation. In this context, Madiba (2022) issued a call to student affairs professionals to engage in scholarship so they can claim their place in the academic community. Schreiber (2014) made a similar call as she challenged researchers and scholars to strengthen the co-and extra-curriculum agenda through multidisciplinary and evidence-based approaches. Similarly, Wildschut and Luescher (2023) argue that it is through research and scholarship that student affairs practitioners, as members of the university, are able to assert their credibility, embolden their communities of practice, and develop their professions. In this way, they can fully participate in the core business of the university as knowledge producers. Accordingly,

student affairs practitioners should seek to overcome the barriers they face and claim their credibility as members of the academe. For the silos to be removed, student affairs practitioners should take their rightful place and, through engagement in scholarship, create opportunities and forge partnerships with teaching staff.

Impactful, sustainable and holistic student success, which is at the heart of youth development, should be seen as a priority given the projection that "by 2030, Africans are expected to comprise 42% of global youth, making this the world's largest workforce" (Population Reference Bureau, 2024). This estimate implies that the future potential for global leadership sits in Africa. Since student success relates to student engagement and positive outcomes regarding academic achievement; holistic personal development; and the cultivation of citizenship, the scholarship of integration is pertinent to the future of Africa (and the world), given that this depends on the development of the continent's youth.

The historical, political, social and economic trajectories of South Africa continue to shape the complex challenges higher education faces. Holistic development of students cannot be driven through monodisciplinary approaches. It requires multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary approaches. The scholarship of integration offers opportunities for these approaches to emerge, as different role players with diverse disciplinary backgrounds within the university create partnerships and break existing silos. It is in this way that the complex challenges that haunt student success can be tackled. As Uhl-Bien et al. (2007, cited in Madiba & Mathekga, 2018, p. 150) quip "it takes complexity to defeat complexity". A 'single-axis' framework (Crenshaw, 1991) will not bring the much-desired impact. As a way forward, Singh (2023) recommends the establishment of committees composed of academics and professional services staff to promote integration. This approach would encourage collaboration and the sharing of resources and facilitate training and knowledge-sharing to improve interdisciplinary skills. It has the potential to create an institutional culture that encourages multidisciplinary collaborations. Embedding scholarship of integration into higher education practice promises to improve the effectiveness of efforts to promote student success.

Student development theory cannot be left to remain stagnant when the ever-changing context within which it is implemented threatens student success. As with all other areas of knowledge, there is a need to develop integrated frameworks that will renew practice and ensure the field is a fertile site for research and scholarship. University staff, across all existing divides, should collaborate in creating intellectual vibrancy in this area. Theories and approaches from a range of disciplines must be adopted in order to produce a proper understanding of students' developmental needs and acknowledgement and affirmation of their agency. In addition, intellectual tools that can only be developed by integrating knowledges and disciplines are required to understand privilege in all its nuance and engage students from marginalised communities effectively.

In order to advance the scholarship of integration there is a need to challenge traditional research cultures and to enable accelerated transformation. Students will need to be equipped with critical skills from a variety of disciplines if they are to address

the global challenges that they will face after graduation, such as climate change; the energy crisis; wars and conflict; corruption; and health related crises. Integrated approaches will need to be adopted to foster such skills, which include critical thinking, creativity, innovation, and problem-solving for positive societal impact. To this end, university staff, in partnership with their students, will need to collaborate across a variety of disciplines to prepare for the challenges ahead and equip students with the appropriate skills.

In this respect, efforts to integrate knowledge and methodologies from multiple disciplines can equip students with holistic learning experiences which will prepare them to navigate the complexities and challenges of the modern world from an advantageous position. Mishra (2024) and Ramamonjisoa (2024) note that students with interdisciplinary skillsets such as critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, and an ability to collaborate and communicate are bound to be well-rounded individuals who are ready and able to navigate the complexities of the 21st century's interconnected and rapidly changing global landscape. In addition, efforts to integrate knowledge and methodologies will promote responsible citizenship and encourage students to become effective contributors to sustainable development in a global society.

Together, the contributions in this issue emphasise the critical role of integration in promoting student success within universities, highlighting the importance of interdisciplinary approaches that bridge academic and professional and support services. They explore various dimensions of such integration, including fostering resilience in challenging disciplines while examining students' perceptions of coping strategies and self-development. The evolution of counselling practices through the adoption of blended models is also underscored, emphasising the need for adaptive support mechanisms amid real-world challenges such as loadshedding. Meanwhile, it is noted that synthesising insights from student representation is vital for informing governance and driving transformation, particularly in aligning university policies to accommodate diverse student identities and experiences – so that, for example, rural identities may be more effectively navigated at urban universities. It is asserted that in response to diverse identities, there is a clear need for nuanced negotiation in order to establish and integrate effective support strategies. This issue of the journal also underscores the importance of engaging student leaders in co-creating knowledge and developmental strategies across personal, organizational and societal levels. Such an approach, it is argued, provides students with agency in shaping their success and ensures the establishment of governance and practices that extend beyond one-size-fits-all approaches.

The specific frameworks discussed in the articles presented in this issue include holistic support for mathematics learning, academic advising, mentorship programmes as foundational pathways to postgraduate success, and the integration of positive psychology into student affairs practice to facilitate students' self-development. Together, the evidence-based, iterative approaches presented here demonstrate how targeted, interdisciplinary strategies enhance student retention, resilience and holistic development. The papers and the studies they report on advocate for a scholarship of

integration that brings together diverse perspectives to meet the multifaceted needs of students in higher education. The implementation of multidisciplinary approaches will come at a price and push many out of their comfort zones. However, the benefits arising from these approaches are worth every effort.

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