Challenges faced by student affairs and services departments in institutions of higher learning

Professor Gift Rupande
Department of Student Affairs, Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), Zimbabwe

*Corresponding Author:
Professor Gift Rupande
Email: grupande@yahoo.com

Abstract: Student affairs professionals are inundated by various challenges in their day to day activities. The duty to mould the character of the student, excessive and underage alcohol abuse by students, limited time to carry out student affairs activities, lack of funding of the various student affairs activities and problems of student retention are some of the challenges that face student affairs practitioners. This paper recommends that the student affairs department should build a strong relationship with the student body and try to match students' needs and the services they provide. It is also recommended that the student affairs department should engage in vigorous resource mobilization activities through engaging the Alumni Associations. In the resource mobilization activities, the corporate world can also be roped in.
Keywords: Challenges, Institutions of higher learning.

INTRODUCTION

Student learning and development are complex, multifaceted functions at higher education institutions and are a shared responsibility among many stakeholders. Students' families, their church communities, the faculty, professional staff, and other members of the university community all combine to support student growth and development. Student affairs professionals play a unique role by enriching student learning and integrating the various aspects of college experience from its very beginning to the end. Student affairs professionals have the responsibility to help students integrate the development and expression of their faith into their larger learning experiences. In this paper, the writer is going to give the challenges that are faced by student affairs personnel in institutions of higher learning as they are engaged in their day to day activities in the various colleges they work in.

Students' affairs personnel face challenges in molding good personal and responsible behavior through the formation of character and virtues [1]. Students' personal choices around issues of alcohol or drug use, sexual behavior, and other moral and health related issues are very important. Student affairs professionals in colleges and universities should partner with pastoral leaders to provide ongoing opportunities to develop programs to support students in making appropriate choices that show respect for self and others. Pascarella, and Terenzini, [2] wrote that the other problems on higher education campuses are alcohol misuse. Efforts to combat the problems of excessive and underage drinking by college students must begin prior to enrollment and continue at least throughout the first year of college being championed by the students' affairs department. The challenge then, for institutions of higher education is to create alcohol policies and practices that are grounded in these demographic and developmental realities.

Students' affairs personnel in colleges and universities believed that finding the time to plan and administer their assessments and integrate that work into their daily duties is a challenge. For example a fair amount of time is required for the students' affairs officer to do his or her duties. Since a student service unit maintains an open door policy where there are people in and out of their office all the time, so time is a challenge. Huba and Freed [21] asserted that using learner-centered assessment is time consuming for the students affairs department.

Astin [3] noted that there is need for additional resources to be allocated to the student's affairs department, specifically in the form of professional assessment staff. For instance, additional professional staff is needed in the division's assessment programs. Sound management and fiscal autonomy, with appropriate oversight by governmental agencies and guided by constituent involvement and critique, are important ingredients in successful higher education structures. Henderson [4], pointed out that related to those principles is the reality that higher education must seek multiple sources of funding both within the traditional structures and throughout the public and private sectors. Formation of strategic partnerships with these groups could afford higher education new ways to

achieve its goals of enhanced student learning and success.

Lack of funding for the various activities carried out by the student affairs department is also a challenge to the student affairs department. Friedberg [5], is of the opinion that student affairs funding ideally should be multifaceted and must include significant institutional support. Funding from outside sources such as grants, private sector foundations, fund-raising, and alumni giving, may have to be employed to provide the level and array of services required of a particular culture and nation. Resources must be allocated to those student services and programs that enhance student learning and success in relation to need and demand.

Forrest [6] said that access to information and technology must be available to both the students and the student affairs personnel but in many organisations this is still a challenge. Training of faculty, staff, and students to utilize the full range of available hardware, software, and structures/systems to deliver timely and accurate information is just as important as the access to information and technology. Information technology (I.T.) is essential to efficient and effective management of services and programs for students. Therefore, I.T. must be made available to students and student affairs and services workers in order to achieve learning and success goals for students. Himelein, Vogel, and Wachowiak [7], asserted that the sharing of knowledge, international cooperation, and emerging technologies can offer new opportunities to reduce the gap between industrially developed and developing countries regarding access to and resources for higher education. Information technology and telecommunications must play a major role in developing quality educational program by the students' affairs department.

Students' affairs departments face challenges in that at times higher education institutions do not place students at the centre of their focus within a lifelong learning perspective so that they are fully integrated into the global knowledge society of the twenty-first century [8]. Students must be considered as equal and fundamental partners and stakeholders in their own education with the right to organize themselves as they see fit within the context of their educational institutions, systems, and communities. Society must make the assumption that students are capable of learning and organizing themselves to participate in governance of higher education. Feldman and Newcomb [9] pointed out that students are key stakeholders who deserve the respect due to equal members of society. It is also reasonable for society to assume that students will enter higher education with the idea that they also are obligated to utilize the resources provided to them in a responsible fashion, and to give back to society by becoming worthy, actively involved global citizens. Perkins [10], regarded higher

education and student affairs and services, as integral partners in providing services and programs, and must be student centred and include students as partners and responsible stakeholders in their education. Students must be at the table with other higher education decision-makers at the institution, government, and UNESCO levels including follow-up conferences and meetings related to the needs. Students have the right and responsibility to organize them to participate in governance and to pursue their personal and social interests. At the end of it all students are regarded as mere consumers of what higher education institutions believe they should learn not what the students themselves think should be included in the curriculum of their educational programmes.

Perkins [10], indicated that higher education student affairs and services, department has challenges in enhancing student retention and graduation rates, develop global citizenship skills, and provide society with new human capital and potential that can help everyone as we move forward toward a true family of nations. Once the student has enrolled in a college, it is the wish and duty of the student affairs department to make sure that the student will stay for the whole duration of his or her course until graduation. Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering [11] argued that the student affairs department is confronted with problems of drop outs and students' retention is rather poor. A number of factors are responsible for this kind of a scenario, and among them is the problem of finance where some students drop out of college due to lack of funds to pay for their studies. Recent trends continue to put more financial pressure on students and their families. For example, according to the Citizens for Responsible Education Reform [20], since the 1980s, college tuition has increased annually at the rate of two to three times the rate of inflation. Further, the typical bill for tuition, fees, room, board, books and incidentals at public institutions is $10,069, which represents 23 percent of the average American family's household income[23]. Today's students must cobble together a financial aid package which is complex, difficult to access, and more dependent upon loans and work than ever before, in order to stay enrolled[24].

Erickson and Strommer [12], argued that freedom of expression and a free exchange of ideas are central to a quality higher education system. Academic freedom is a concept that must extend to faculty, staff, and students alike but students' affairs personnel are at tomes confronted with issues of freedom of expression by students as they are victimized by the university authorities or they are victimized by security officer in some states.

Copeland [13], in sync with Justis, and Rendon [14], are of the opinion that the opportunity for ongoing professional development of students' affairs staff must

be an integral part of the basic way of doing business in higher education. But this is still a challenge to many institutions of higher learning .Higher quality professional development will ensure that students are afforded quality career guidance and development opportunities to facilitate the transition into, through, and out of higher education into society and the world of work. This concept of career guidance and how it is applied may vary by country, but nobody doubts its importance.

According to Chickering [15], in concurrence with Wilds, and Wilson [16], students affairs department sometimes face the problem of partners. Partnerships with all sectors within and immediately outside higher education must be established to promote not only life-long learning, but also learning for life. Cashin, Presley, and Meilman [17], also asserted that these partnerships include students, faculty, staff, alumni, parents, employers, social service agencies, and primary and secondary education, government agencies, and local, national, regional, and global communities. Student affairs and services professionals must continue to partner with their colleagues abroad through exchanges, conferences, seminars, and research as a way to continuously improve in their performance and to keep abreast with students' affairs world trends since the word is now a global village.

McAloon [1], together with Straus, and Howe [18], argued that students' affairs personnel are expected to have a thorough knowledge of the students with whom they work. Since the world is now a global village, a thorough knowledge of the composition and characteristics (demographics) of the student population, the broad diversity, their expectations and satisfaction , their psycho-social/physical development, as well as their behavior and motivation is crucial in ensuring the development and administration of the programs necessary to promote student success and yet this may place a heavy load on the shoulders of those who work in the students affairs department.

Barrett. And Simmons [19], asserted that the students affairs personnel must be highly skilled in interpersonal skills since the central focus of student affairs and services is dealing with individuals and must possess superior communication skills, including listening. The staff needs to interact on a one-to-one basis with a wide spectrum of students and this may prove to be difficult to some members of the student affairs department.

CONCLUSION
Academic advisors should educate themselves about the unique student population they are dealing with and the challenges they encounter while pursuing their degrees. It is important to understand that each institution is unique and may have different resources and processes for the student population. Thus, academic advisors should continually keep abreast of ever-changing institutional and governmental policies regarding all students in institutions of higher learning. Most of them students do not live on campus, they commute or live off campus and over one-third is over 25 years of age. Over one-third of the students are studying part-time and most of them are working part- or full-time. These commuting, older, part-time, working students typically spend very little time on campus beyond attending class. Limited time on campus means fewer opportunities to connect with other students and faculty. It means less chance of getting involved with the academic life of the college but still the student affairs personnel must assist these students.

RECOMMENDATIONS
There are several noteworthy recommendations for academic advisors. The initial steps are to build a strong advisor-student relationship and to realize that students encounter many problems. When working with students it is also important for academic advisors to identify as soon as possible whether or not the student is sponsored by parents or is sponsored by other organizations and to find those who have problems in paying for their education so that possible donors can be identified. Lastly, it is beneficial for academic advisors to learn how to identify and help students that have mental and/or physical disabilities. A significant percentage of students enter higher education with post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, traumatic brain injuries as well as physical disabilities (Tanelian and Jaycox, 2008). Coordinating services among disability support offices, counseling centers, and other resources on campus can better assist academic advisors in meeting the immediate and long-term needs of these students. Helping these students build their self-advocacy skills and encouraging them to seek needed care can help these students succeed. Academic advisors should have an understanding of the various disabilities and disorders common with this population.

REFERENCES
1. McAloon DT; The effect of alcohol abuse on academic achievement on two-year campuses." Community College Review, 1994; 22: 12-18.
2. Pascarella ET, Terenzini PT; How College Affects Students: Findings and Insights from Twenty Years of Research. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991.
3. Astin WW; What matters in college: Four critical years revisited. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.
4. Henderson C; College Freshman With Disabilities: A Triennial Statistical Profile. Research Report, Health Resource Center. Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 1995.

5. Friedberg L; Did Unilateral Divorce Raise Divorce rates?: Evidence from Panel Study. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1998.
6. Forrest A; Managing the Flow of Students Through Higher Education." National Forum: Phi Kappa Phi Journal, 1987; 68: 39-42.
7. Himelein MJ, Vogel RW, Wachowiak; Non-Consensual Sexual Experiences In Pre-College Women: Prevalence and Risk Factors. Journal of Counseling and Development, 1994; 72: 411-415.
8. Erikson EH; Childhood and society. (2nd edition). New York: Norton, 1963.
9. Feldman K, Newcomb T, (Eds.); The Impact of College on Student*s*. Volumes 1 and 2. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1969.
10. Perkins HW, Meilman PW, Leichliter JS, Cashin JR, Presley CA; Misperceptions of the norms for the frequency of alcohol and other drug use on college campuses. Journal of American College Health, 1999; 47(6): 253-258.
11. Schlossberg NK, Lynch AQ, Chickering AW; Improving higher education environments for adults: Response programs from entry to departure. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989.
12. Erickson BL, Strommer D; Teaching college freshmen. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991.
13. Copeland D; Generation X: Tales for an accelerated culture. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992.
14. Justis M, Rendon L; Hispanic Students. in M. L. Upcraft and J. N. Gardner (Eds.), The freshman Year Experience: Helping Students Survive and Succeed in Higher Education. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989.
15. Chickering AW; Education and identity. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1969.
16. Wilds DJ, Wilson R; Minorities in Higher Education 1997-98, Sixteenth Annual Status Report. Washington: American Council on Education, 1998.
17. Cashin JR, Presley CA, Meilman PW; Alcohol use in the Greek system: Follow the leader?" Journal of Studies on Alcohol, 1998; 59: 63-70.
18. Straus W, Howe N; Generations: The history of America's future, *1584 to 2069*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc, 1991.
19. Barrett BN, Simmons JL; Violence comes to college. National Association of Student Affairs Professionals Journal, 1998; 1: 93-101.
20. Citizens for Responsible Education Reform; Washington, DC: National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education, 1998.
21. Huba ME, Freed JE; Learner centered assessment on college campuses: Shifting the focus from teaching to learning. Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 2000; *24*(9): 759-766.
22. Tanielian T, Jaycox LH; Invisible wounds of war. Santa Monica, CA: Rand Center. Retrieved on July, 2008; 11.
23. Time Magazine, 1998
24. Chronicle of Higher Education, May 1, 1998