Book review

Creating conditions for student success: Social justice perspectives from a South African university
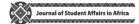by M. Fourie-Malherbe (Ed.) (2016). Stellenbosch, South Africa: African Sun Media.

Reviewed by Nico Venter*

The title immediately draws the attention of anyone working in higher education. I work in a counselling centre at the University of the Free State, and often see students struggle with the same challenges that are described in the book. Students struggle not only psychologically; they face social and academic challenges as well. This book is necessary reading for those of us working in the field. While the research on which the book is based is context-specific, the challenges described therein are applicable to most universities in South Africa. Hence, this volume could serve as a great guide for other universities and could also be used as a benchmark for initiatives in other universities that aim to develop conditions that encourage student success.

Creating conditions for student success: Social justice perspectives from a South African university by Magda Fourie-Malherbe is a compilation of original research conducted by various authors at Stellenbosch University. The book offers a holistic perspective on student success. Through research, various challenges faced by modern-day South African students are addressed. The book focuses not only on academic performance, but also on adjustment to university, and increasing students' chances of employability through the development of graduate attributes. Although this book is based on the experiences of Stellenbosch University students, the research findings could be generalized to other South African universities.

The book is divided into four parts and each part focuses on a different aspect of student success. The first part attributes student success to the quality of adjustment to university life. The second part discusses in four chapters the different in-class experiences of students. These include the relationship between the student and lecturer, developing a sense of mastery, and the use of technology in class. The third part considers out-of-class experiences and is comprised of three chapters. The overarching theme in this part is fostering a sense of relatedness amongst students which can contribute to their success. It also addresses students' emotional and psychological well-being. The last part consists of four chapters and focuses on engagement, graduate attributes, and employability. These chapters emphasise various university experiences that contribute to student success.

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Part one, which focuses on access and the first year, discusses students' experiences and adjustment to university, especially non-traditional students who may have had no prior (even second-hand) exposure to the university community, environment, and its workings. It deals with the experiences of students as they first arrive at university and their sense of belonging. Furthermore, it looks at research done at Stellenbosch University which indicates that a mentoring programme could assist students in their adjustment to university life. One of the chapters also looks at empowering students through participation in an advanced mathematical programme. The advanced mathematical programme requires students to master various competencies, which include critical thinking, time management, managing large workloads, perseverance, comprehension, and confidence in mathematical abilities. The programme was found to have contributed to assisting students with the adjustment from school to university. However, as the author notes, implementing such a programme can have serious financial implications for the school and students. However, its importance cannot be ignored.

Part two focuses on in-class experiences and starts with a chapter on using audience response technology to enhance the educator-learner relationship. This chapter explores an alternative to the traditional method of teaching. In the highlighted case studies, audience response technology was developed for students to use on their mobile devices. Mixed results were received. On the one side, the learners have to participate with technological advancements and on the other side, the educator's capability with these technological advancements might influence this two-way relationship. This chapter concludes that both the learner and educator have a responsibility to work on the two-way relationship utilizing technology such as this. Part two also addresses the issue of student exclusion from technology-based academic practices and that the academic environment should focus on fostering inclusivity for people lacking access to technology-based academic practices. Furthermore, this part also looks at the willingness of academics to use technology to educate learners. As mentioned in the book, there is not a straightforward question and answer, but an interplay of factors can contribute to the eagerness of academia to use technology in academics. Furthermore, this part looks at some of the means through which a well-rounded student capable of being employable can be formed. One programme looked at teaching students an extra language to help them communicate more effectively with others. In this instance, by teaching the students the basics of isiXhosa, they were better able to relate to others. Part 2 provides great insight into new ways of approaching academics, and so could be a benefit to lecturers.

Part 3 focuses on out-of-class experiences. This immediately drew me in, since I felt the subjects explored therein could assist me in my own work with students in a counselling centre. Although universities focus on academics, the social aspect of student well-being cannot be ignored. I personally have a lot of interest in how social environment can affect academics. This part addresses various factors that can play a role in student success

outside the classroom. A major focus is creating a sense of belonging, in part achieved by Stellenbosch University through encouraging students to question and challenge stereotyping and personal bias and creating shared spaces for students that live on and off campus. Both were implemented successfully. This part further looks at the role management can play. In this scenario, it looked at the importance of the roles residence heads can play in the achievement of success by acting as mentors. Knowledgeability and good leadership skills are emphasised as significant characteristics residence heads should possess to make a positive impact in these roles. Furthermore, the book posits that counselling centres can play an important role in advocating for and promoting social change. This way, counselling centres could also bolster their significance to student well-being by including advocacy for change to their traditional roles of diagnosing and providing therapy.

Part four addresses student engagement, graduate attributes, and employability. Programmes can be launched at universities to promote social change, such as having critical discussions about diversity, the importance of exchange programmes, as well as networking opportunities. By addressing inequalities such as these, graduates might stand a more equitable chance at landing the jobs for which they have studied. Student success is not only about academics, but also about opportunities after study completion. Graduation does not guarantee a job, therefore, I felt like Part 4, Chapter 16 especially, can give students a glimpse of what they can do to improve their chances of navigating their way successfully into and adjusting to the work environment.

Creating conditions for student success: Social justice perspectives from a South African university shatters the notion that studying alone is sufficient for student success, highlighting the importance of striking a healthy balance between students' academic, personal and social lives. Although this book is based on the research done at Stellenbosch University, it could serve just as well in assisting other universities in their endeavours to create conditions for student success. It offers a good benchmarking tool for other universities. A further important note is that the book is accessible. I personally enjoyed reading the book. It was an easy read; thus its potential beneficiaries are not only those involved in higher education. Prospective students and anyone with an interest in the inner workings of a South African university today stand to profit from this reading.

I hope its reception encourages Stellenbosch University and other institutions to continue to develop and build on programmes that have been found to contribute to student success.