

CO-CURRICULUM SEMINAR 2014

Creating seamless connections: Intersecting the social and academic lives of students

Teboho Moja* and Monroe France**

The contributions on this topic are based on a presentation we made at a colloquium organised by the Centre for Student Support Services at the University of the Western Cape and attended by participants from various universities. There is growing interest in the topic amongst student affairs professionals in South Africa, and we believe that the topic is of interest to student affairs professionals throughout the continent. In the presentation we explored the links between co-curricular activities and students' academic lives. Our starting point is that planned and organised activities that allow for the intersection of the social lives and academic lives of students contribute to the holistic development of students.

There are great strides made in intersecting academic and social lives of students in some of the universities and colleges in the USA. This presentation draws some lessons from those experiences as we explore the role of a co-curriculum in the African context and outline lessons to be learned from others' experiences. We begin by identifying common features between the US and African universities. The first is that higher education systems in both the US and African universities comprise of large undergraduate education programmes. The second is that the systems have some elements of their colonial legacies of university lives that combined living and learning arrangements. Historically, such arrangements were made mainly for convenience because there were fewer institutions and the students came from various parts of the country or beyond their own countries to study and learn from scholars who were masters of their disciplines.

In Africa, most countries had one university for the entire country, and some did not have universities at all and therefore sent their students to neighbouring countries for university education. Various arrangements were made to provide university education between countries on a regional basis, as was the case in east Africa, or made arrangements to split one university into segments offered in different countries, as was the case with the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland as one entity. Students had to leave their homes and stay in halls of residence, which in the past were referred to as hostels or dormitories. Housing in general was organised and regarded as a mere convenience where

* Clinical professor of higher education at New York University, USA. Email: teboho.moja@nyu.edu

** Assistant vice president for student diversity and director of the Center for Multicultural Education and Programs at New York University, USA.

students could live and access university education. There were little or no planned activities to integrate their residential arrangements with their academic lives beyond providing them with rules and regulations during their stay in those settings. As a result, student life in residence halls in Africa has been characterised by conflict and strikes over broad social and political issues or over their own living conditions, especially strikes over food quality.

Residential life in the African university context was seen more as a convenience arrangement, and no formal programmes were provided to link residential life with the academic lives of students. Administrators put in charge of students were often charged with the task of keeping an eye on the students and administering the rules set for living in student residences. Residential and organised social life as part of the co-curriculum has largely been scanty or non-existent in African universities. A case in point is drawn from South Africa, which had two parallel systems of universities that were racially segregated. The historically white universities had academics assigned to play the role of *in loco parentis* with some minimal academic support, while the historically black universities, similar to most situations in African universities, had administrators with no mandate for academic support. The US has moved more into professionalising the role of student affairs administrators who work closely with the academic staff to provide a rich student life experience.

Currently, there is growing interest in integrating the social and academic lives of students, and student affairs professionals in Africa are exploring this issue. The colloquium presentation shared a brief history of student affairs in the US context, and of how the profession became professionalised, and concluded with examples of how New York University structures its programmes and co-curricular activities to integrate students' social and academic lives. Five examples of co-curriculum activities at New York University were shared as examples of how to integrate students' social and academic lives.

The first area indicated ways in which co-curricular activities become part of collaborative learning, using Living Learning Communities in residence halls or the inclusion of Faculty in Residence Programmes. The programmes form part of the university's effort to create intimate learning communities for students within residence halls as a way of integrating students' academic experiences with their residential lives. Both examples illustrate how learning becomes seamless and continues beyond the classroom by allowing students to be organised into learning communities around topics of interest, as well as by letting faculty members become part of the residence hall living where there is continuation of interaction amongst students and faculty members. There are reported benefits of improved performance in classrooms enhanced by this form of collaboration. Academic fellows participating in the programme work closely with one another and with residence hall staff to set an intellectual tone in the residence hall, and to design and implement a wide range of programmatic and other opportunities for students to interact with academic staff and with one another. Another benefit of the programme for a university located in a big city is to create a "small college" life within a larger community and the benefits of learning together with colleagues outside the classroom.

The second area is illustrated through partnership courses across academic departments and the student affairs department. The courses offered jointly at NYU are service learning courses, first-year student seminars, intergroup dialogue programmes and scholars' programmes such as the Martin Luther King Jr. Scholars Programme. The service learning courses sometimes take the form of alternative breaks programmes, which provide students with the opportunity to learn about political and social community dynamics while becoming catalysts for collaborative social change. Through learning and practice, students explore the theory of integrating service, education and reflection to create meaningful change in their communities. The alternative break courses take place during spring break and some of them bear two credits. The Intergroup Dialogue Programme is a nationally recognised eight-week and one-credit-bearing course that brings together small groups of students from diverse backgrounds to share their experiences and gain new knowledge related to diversity and social justice. The course is facilitated by trained graduate students or student affairs professionals. The Martin Luther King Jr. Programme is a programme that celebrates students' academic achievement and leadership and builds a community amongst students.

The third area of joint programmes is fostered through the creation of full-time academic staff positions within student affairs units.

The fourth example is the situation where student affairs practitioners teach in the higher education programme as adjunct staff and in some instances sit on doctoral dissertation committees. The benefit of the two areas mentioned here is not only that of integrating student lives but also of linking theory to practice for graduate students with aspirations to pursue careers as student affairs professionals.

The fifth and final area to be mentioned here is the strategy to decentralise student life/services to academic departments in order to bring the services closer to students.

