

EDITORIAL

Redesigning student affairs in Africa with a care-centred approach to student well-being

Birgit Schreiber,¹ Thierry M. Luescher² & Teboho Moja³

Welcome to this special issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (Vol. 13, Issue 2), guest-edited by Dr Henry Mason who is also part of the editorial team of JSAA. In this edition, we turn our focus to the vital theme of student well-being as a critical and often underappreciated dimension of student success across African higher education.

Towards a humanising theory and praxis of student affairs

Student affairs and services in Africa stands at the heart of the social justice, well-being and student success project (Schreiber, 2014). In the contemporary African university, we can no longer view student affairs as a peripheral or merely administrative function that manages students or delivers transactional services. Such hegemonic notions, often promoted in traditional and outdated student affairs theory emanating from the USA, diminish the transformative potential of our work. Rather, student affairs must see itself as a critical voice of visioning, beyond the transactional service provision that supports and manages students. Student affairs needs to envisage itself at the heart of the African transformation project (September, 2025). Universities in the Global South are becoming caring spaces, indeed humanising, as highlighted, for example, in the University of Cape Town's Strategic Framework 2035 for the Department of Student Affairs (DSA, 2025), which sees its vision as "Creating an environment where every interaction is a humanising encounter, nurturing the spirit and fostering a deeper connection in our shared journey."

In this regard, student affairs across Africa needs to envisage itself at the heart of this human-centred transformation. Our role extends far beyond service delivery and support; we are the architects of student belonging and advocates of holistic well-being.

The time has come for student affairs to emancipate itself from inherited, often colonial and bureaucratic traditions that defined our role as reactive, regulatory, or welfare-oriented. In the African context, student affairs must be reimaged as a

- 1 Prof. Dr Birgit Schreiber, Member: Africa Centre, Albert Ludwig University of Freiburg, Germany; Extraordinary Professor: University of the Western Cape, South Africa; President: International Association of Student Affairs (IASAS). JSAA Editorial Executive and founding editor. Email: birgitdewes@gmail.com. ORCID: 0000-0003-2469-0504
- 2 Dr Thierry M. Luescher, Director: Postgraduate Studies and Researcher Development, University of Cape Town; Adjunct Professor: Nelson Mandela University, South Africa. JSAA Editorial Executive and founding member. Email: thierry.luescher@uct.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0002-6675-0512
- 3 Prof. Teboho Moja, Clinical Professor: Higher Education, New York University, USA; Visiting Research Fellow: Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship, University of Pretoria; Extraordinary Professor: Institute of Post School Studies, University of the Western Cape, South Africa. JSAA Editor-in-chief. Email: teboho.moja@nyu.edu. ORCID: 0000-0001-6343-3020

liberatory project, one that centres on human flourishing, relational care and well-being, and social justice. We do not simply respond to student needs. We shape the very conditions that enable agency, equity, hope and personal transformation. Our practice must therefore move from managing to meaning-making, from service to solidarity, and from procedural compliance to visionary leadership and innovation.

Joan Tronto's ethics of care in the African student affairs context

At the core of this transformative vision lies an *ethics of care* not as a soft or sentimental ideal, but as a rigorous, political, and justice-oriented framework (Tronto, 1998). Caring work in African student affairs is about restoring dignity, recognising interdependence, and affirming our shared humanity. It is a praxis of justice, rooted in empathy and guided by the belief that well-being and success are collective, not individual, achievements. Through an intentional ethics of care we operationalise our commitment to inclusion, belonging, and transformation, creating contexts that enable students to feel seen, valued, and empowered.

Well-being is possible in a caring context and Joan Tronto's work on ethics of care (1998) offers a powerful framework for rethinking how we live, learn, and work in caring ways. Her insistence that care is not merely a personal virtue, but a political and professional ethic challenges us to reconsider what it means to act caringly towards our students, among each other as practitioners, and within our institutions and society. For both students and practitioners, Tronto's five dimensions of care (i.e. attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, and solidarity) provide an ethical compass for caringly navigating the complexities of higher education and professional practice.

According to Tronto (1998), care begins with attentiveness, noticing the needs of the self and others. In our African context, student affairs professionals operate within deeply diverse and often unequal and resource-constrained environments. Attentiveness therefore means recognising the varied personal, familial, socio-economic, and cultural realities that shape students' experiences. It requires sensitivity to issues such as food insecurity, mental health, housing, disability, ethnicity and religion, and the lingering legacies of colonial and structural inequities, such as ethnicism, racism, sexism, xenophobia and homophobia. To be attentive is to listen carefully, to notice who is struggling, who is excluded and to note and rectify when the system is marginalising, excluding or simply uncaring.

From attentiveness follows responsibility (i.e. the ethical obligation to respond to what we observe). In student affairs, this entails taking active steps to ensure that policies and programs promote equity and belonging. It means not turning away from systemic challenges but working collaboratively to improve the conditions under which students learn and live. Responsibility follows attentiveness by taking ownership of a situation and ensuring wrongs are made right; what needs addressing, is addressed; what needs fixing is repaired. Responsibility also involves self-reflection, which is caring for ourselves and our teams so that we can sustain the emotional and professional demands of the work. In the African context, where resources are often limited, responsible care includes advocacy, which is ensuring that student well-being is prioritised in institutional

decision-making, and accountability, which ensures that limited resources are allocated in a fair and just way.

Tronto's (1998) third dimension is competence, which is the dimension that ensures that care is both effective and ethical. Student affairs professionals must develop systemic understanding, understand critical theory and practice, counselling, advising, program design, and research. Caring competently involves using relevant, indigenous and evidence-based practice while remaining grounded in empathy, context, and relevance. It is about caring with competence, not just doing it but doing it in the best possible and professional manner, thereby ensuring that understanding and interventions genuinely contribute to student success and institutional transformation.

The fourth dimension, responsiveness, invites professionals to engage in dialogue with students and to adapt to the students' and the institution's evolving needs. For our African higher education landscape responsiveness means to listen, being flexible, inclusive, and innovative, and being willing to consider new ways of caring for students and institutions. It involves hearing students' voices, acknowledging their agency, and co-creating solutions that affirm dignity and empowerment, and create transformative experiences.

Finally, Joan Tronto's fifth dimension of her ethics of care focuses on solidarity and connects individual acts of care to collective transformation. To care for student affairs in Africa is to commit to justice, diversity, and sustainability, that is, to care not only for students, but also for colleagues, communities and the environment that supports diverse living and learning. Solidarity compels professionals to work together within and across institutions and borders, building a culture of kindness, collegiality, and shared purpose.

Through Tronto's framework, care in student affairs becomes a profound act of social commitment. It encompasses care for the self and others, care for learning and knowledge, care for institutions and their cultures, and care for the societies and ecosystems in which universities are embedded. A praxis of care has the potential to transform student affairs into a profession that not only serves students but also helps build interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge that promotes caring, equitable, and resilient contexts in which our institutions and our students are embedded.

Tronto's framework in the context of African student affairs research

Three recent publications that centre well-being in African student affairs illustrate the benefits that research has for an evidence-based student affairs praxis and the application of the ethics of care framework. Between 2018 and 2022, Thierry Luescher, Angelina Wilson-Fadiji, Keamogetse Morwe and others conducted a series of studies using photovoice and world café methodologies into the well-being implications that student exposure to violence during #FeesMustFall and its aftermath had for students. In the photovoice book *#FeesMustFall and its Aftermath: Violence, Wellbeing and the Student Movement in South Africa* (Luescher et al., 2022), they provide a rich, grounded conceptualisation of student well-being, built directly from students' narratives and photographs. The authors synthesise the students' reflections on the ways in which they

restored well-being after traumatic exposure to violence into a powerful framework of what well-being is to students. Here, students frame well-being as a set of relational, cultural, material, and psychosocial “wellbeing resources”, which enable functioning, protect against ill-being, and support flourishing under adverse conditions. The key well-being dimensions identified are:

- Well-being is social: Found in togetherness, collective action, singing, dancing, debating, storytelling, and sharing ideas; well-being emerges through relational connection and mutual recognition.
- Well-being is familial: Grounded in the emotional, moral, and practical support of extended family networks and “kin-like” figures in the struggle.
- Well-being is epistemological: Students find sustenance in knowledge, especially through black intellectual traditions, political education, and historical consciousness, which provide pride and resilience.
- Well-being is spiritual: Collective chanting, revolutionary songs, connection, and communion that nurture the soul and heal wounds.
- Well-being knows limitations: Fair rules, predictable institutional responses, and justice-oriented boundaries provide a sense of stability and safety.
- Well-being is a vector: Purpose, political clarity, and moral conviction give direction and strength; activism becomes a source of meaning.
- Well-being is material and spatial: Safe physical spaces, places to escape harm, hide, gather, rest, and commune matter deeply; even small material resources can protect and restore well-being. (Luescher et al., 2022, pp. 156-157)

Taken together, this becomes a distinctly *ubuntu*-oriented conception of well-being, foregrounding the notion “I am well because we are” (Luescher et al., 2022, p. 156). The book also emphasises that well-being involves a dialectical dance between the positives and negatives of life, whereby students find meaning and transformative growth amidst hardship and forms of emancipatory engagement and resistance.

The second, related contribution “The dance of the positives and negatives of life: Student wellbeing in the context of #FeesMustFall-related violence” picks up on the conclusions of the photovoice book. Here, Wilson Fadji et al. (2023) use a distinct psychological well-being lens to both complement and deepen the photovoice findings. Drawing on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being theories, the article shows that well-being involves “purpose, autonomy, personal growth, mastery, positive relationships, and self-acceptance” (Ryff & Singer, as cited in Wilson Fadji et al.) and that violence interacts with all these domains.

The key empirical insights from their analysis include that students’ experiences of violence generate psychological risk but can also catalyse social identification, meaning-making, and collective self-esteem, which buffer the negative effects; and identity affirmation, group belonging, and recognition of shared struggle can indirectly enhance well-being, reduce post-traumatic stress, and create pathways to empowerment. The study shows that students use a mix of adaptive and non-adaptive coping strategies, but the critical variable is the presence of protective resources (i.e. connection, purpose,

mastery of space, and supportive relationships). In this regard, well-being improves when students feel they can act, influence their environment, and articulate grievances meaningfully.

The third publication in this trio directly addresses itself to student affairs practitioners as the manual *Restoring Wellbeing After Student Protests: Lessons from #FeesMustFall* (Morwe et al. 2022). The manual translates the research into actionable guidance for student affairs. It identifies two core responsibilities: (1) preventing confrontation and violence through accountability, engagement, responsiveness, and care; and (2) restoring well-being after violent confrontations through counselling, mindfulness, objective well-being supports, and innovation.

The manual frames well-being as “a state of contentment, meaning, life satisfaction, and ability to manage stress ... not a problem-free life, but the dance of positives and negatives” (Morwe et al., 2022, p. 8), thus echoing key insights of the other two publications. It emphasises that student affairs practitioners often encounter students before, during, and after crises, and are thus uniquely positioned to foster trust, guide students through conflict, and support healing. It thereby seeks to position student affairs as *a professionalised, restorative, student-centred care system* within the university.

Evidently, Tronto’s ethics of care aligns strongly with all three sources in terms of:

- **Attentiveness:** Universities must recognise that student experiences often involve structural, cultural, symbolic, epistemic and even physical violence, and understand student well-being as relational and collective – not merely individual. The photovoice narratives reveal students’ deep need to be seen, heard, and believed.
- **Responsibility:** Student affairs practitioners, university leadership, and academics share responsibility for preventing harm, responding timeously to grievances, and nurturing caring environments that support purpose and belonging.
- **Competence:** The manual in particular stresses that universities must be capable caregivers, able to provide counselling, safe spaces, restorative practices, predictable rules, and effective engagement strategies (echoing the insight that “well-being knows limitations”).
- **Responsiveness:** Students judge care by how institutions respond – not by intentions but with interventions. Delayed or indifferent responses breed frustration, escalate grievances and harm well-being. Conversely, timely, reciprocal engagement restores dignity.
- **Solidarity:** The *ubuntu* ethos that emerged from the students’ photovoice contributions (“I am well because we are”) and the findings on collective identification highlight care as a socially just, shared endeavour.

In this Issue of JSAA

Linked to the ideas above are the articles this issue, where our guest editor Dr Henry Mason brings together this collection of articles that explore the various aspects that reflect a caring approach to students' well-being.

Together, these contributions illustrate that student well-being is both a shared responsibility and a central measure of success in higher education. They remind us that thriving students are not just academically successful, but also connected, resilient, and supported within their learning ecosystems.

Just as fostering student well-being is an act of care that sustains learning communities, so too is the care work of our reviewers. This reminds us that the health of our students and the vitality of our scholarly field depend on the same ethic of generosity, attentiveness, and shared responsibility.

Enjoy the read!

Birgit, Thierry and Teboho

References

- Department of Student Affairs (DSA) (2025). *About executive director's office: Our vision & value*. <https://uct.ac.za/dsa/dsa-executive-directors-office>
- Luescher, T. M., Wilson Fadji, A., Morwe, K., Erasmus, A., Letsoalo, T. S., & Mokhema, S. (2022). *#FeesMustFall and its aftermath: Violence, wellbeing and the student movement in South Africa*. HSRC Press.
- Morwe, K., Luescher, T. M., & Wilson Fadji, A. (2022). *Restoring wellbeing after student protests: Lessons from #FeesMustFall and its aftermath*. A manual for Student Affairs and Services professionals and student leaders. HSRC.
- Schreiber, B. (2014). The role of student affairs in promoting social justice in South Africa. *Journal of College & Character*, 15(4), 212- 218. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1515/jcc-2014-0026>
- September, J. (2025, November 13). IASAS APSAA webinar on de-colonising student affairs. IASAS recording, see iasas.global
- Tronto, J. C. (1998). An ethic of care. *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging*, 22(3), 15-20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44875693>
- Wilson Fadji, A., Luescher, T. M., & Morwe, K. (2023). The dance of the positives and negatives of life: Student wellbeing in the context of #FeesMustFall-related violence. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 37(2), 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.20853/37-2-5034>

How to cite:

Schreiber, B., Luescher, T. M., & Moja, T. (2025). Redesigning student affairs in Africa with a care-centred approach to student well-being. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 13(2), ix-xiv. <https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v13i2.6782>