



ENGAGING STUDENTS

Using Evidence to Promote
Student Success

EDITORS

FRANCOIS STRYDOM

GEORGE KUH

SONJA LOOTS



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The Editors

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● PREFACE

What would a transformed higher education system look like? What is the contribution of higher education institutions to a country? How do we create institutions that are ready to welcome a diverse range of students? How do we create institutions that challenge our students to develop the next big idea and address 21st century challenges while providing them with the support that enhances their chances of success?

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) supports the contention of the true meaning of transformation – when all students entering the system have a reasonable chance of success and access to powerful forms of knowledge and practices that will enable them to enter the productive economy and improve their life chances and that of their families (DHET 2016:92).

During a student success conference in 2016, a vice-chancellor from a South African university observed that the higher education system has always had low success and graduation rates. The necessity to identify a key contributing factor to student success, which could be measured and used in conjunction with other data sources to guide interventions, put student engagement on the South African radar.

The journey for the study of student engagement in South Africa started a decade ago with the first full institutional survey in 2007 at the University of the Free State (UFS) to change this track record. From its inception, the focus was on supporting and developing the talented students of South Africa through the use of evidence, and the project aimed to create deeply contextualised measures that were globally benchmarked. The intention of the original United States-based student engagement survey of countering an obsession with rankings by refocusing the quality of higher education debate on students and their learning resonated strongly with the South African team.

In 2007, the concept of student engagement was not well known in South Africa, even though it was firmly established in the United States. Interest in this field of research came into national focus after the Council on Higher Education commissioned a national project on student engagement to better understand what it is that students do while they are at university and how this might impact on their success. This initial project ran from 2008-2009 and included 11 institutions. After a review of the student engagement measure internationally and nationally, the Kresge Foundation provided funding to take the project into its next level of development, which currently involves four surveys adapted for the South African context administered in 15 public higher education institutions, with a growing number of private higher education institutions participating and showing interest.

The project provides a data-driven depiction of student experiences, which could be used by institutional leaders, academics and support staff to create conditions that impact student development and success. In some cases, institutions have used the data to facilitate change, and in other cases operational demands and changing institutional priorities have overtaken the importance of the use of the data.

Throughout the development of the project, being a student in South African higher education has not become easier, with increasing financial pressure, decreasing state expenditure and increased accountability on how state resources are spent and how they are contributing to the development of the country. The #MustFall campaign of 2015 and 2016 highlighted the need for a realignment of students and their institutions. We believe that knowing what and how students learn, and what they are able to do as a result of their higher education experience, are critical for the success of the North American as well as South African higher education systems. Student engagement data represent the student experience in our institutions and classrooms today. By using the data institutions empower students as agents of change and involve them in obtaining a quality education that will transform not only the institution but also their lives.

PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

This publication has the dual aim of contributing a South African perspective to a rich history of conceptual and empirical research on student learning and success, while also showing how student engagement data form a bridge between academic research and professional practice (McCormick, Kinzie & Gonyea 2013). To achieve the dual aims, evidence from the South African surveys of student engagement and leading international experts have been integrated to:

- introduce student engagement as a field and a key to success;
- further a systemic understanding of the student experience;
- illustrate how entering students can be better understood and supported;
- facilitate the development of academics through student engagement;
- stimulate the development of South African high-impact practices;
- illustrate how student engagement evidence can be leveraged for institutional change and improvement;
- explore the role of student affairs in student engagement and learning;
- highlight the role of institutional leadership in advancing student engagement;
- promote pedagogical practices that matter for student success; and
- demonstrate how we are using engagement data for change and empowerment at course level.

We close by taking stock of student engagement in South African higher education and sharing the plan moving forward with the variety of stakeholders who are committed

to improving student success and the effectiveness and efficiency of higher education. They include governmental, public and private institutional stakeholders, as well as intra-institutional faculties, departments and individuals. The content will also be of interest to both researchers in higher education as well as leaders and practitioners who would like to integrate evidence into their institutional roles.

HOW TO READ AND USE THIS BOOK

The book consists of three parts, complemented by an introduction (Chapter 1) as well as the summary chapter (Chapter 11) that includes some reflections and recommendations.

Part I provides a status report on student engagement in South Africa. Chapter 2 shares data from the South African Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE) to provide a systemic perspective on the experiences of students in higher education. Chapter 3 shares data from the Beginning University Survey of Student Engagement (BUSSE) on the expectations of first-year students and contextualises the data using the financial stress scale introduced in SASSE 2016. The next chapter explores lecturers' perspectives on student engagement using data from the Lecturer Survey of Student Engagement (LSSE). The chapter considers similarities and differences between student and staff perspectives and discusses the implications for staff development. This section of the book closes with Chapter 5, which introduces the development of high-impact practices in the South African context, and shares SASSE data on the prevalence of these practices.

Part II of the book presents perspectives about how to create institutional conditions that matter for student success. Chapter 6 shares strategies for leading evidence-based improvement through student engagement by using different 'roles' or designations as an international vehicle for engaging people in evidence-based change. Chapter 7 addresses the role engagement data can play in assisting student affairs to advance student learning. The critical importance of learning and involving managers at all levels in promoting student engagement, as well as practical suggestions on how to do this are explored in Chapter 8.

Part III shifts the focus to teaching and learning and how conditions for success can be created in the classroom. Chapter 9 explores the potential impact of effective or high-impact pedagogical practices on student success. Chapter 10 demonstrates how student engagement data from the Classroom Survey of Student Engagement (CLASSE) can be used to promote evidence-based improvement in pedagogy at the course/module level as well as evidence-based academic staff development.

NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY

Because this book has been authored by South African and United States scholars, some terms or concepts might need clarification:

- In pre-democratic South Africa, racial groups were divided into “Indian”, “black”, “coloured” and “white”. To track transformation and equity interventions, these groupings are still used in research circles. However, during the contextualisation process to adapt the engagement surveys to the South African contexts, students were given a choice which racial classification categories they would prefer to have in the surveys. The options they selected include “black African”, “coloured”, “Indian”, “white”, “other”, “mixed-race”, and “I prefer not to answer”. Analyses throughout the book primarily rely on comparisons between black African and white students. This is because samples representing the other groups are small in comparison to black African and white groups who participated in the surveys.
- The term “first-generation” refers to whether students are the first in their immediate families to graduate from university.
- US references to “colleges”, “courses”, “faculty” (academic staff) have for the most part been changed to jargon more familiar to a South African audience, however, some references to these terms have been left unchanged to preserve the intended meaning the authors tried to convey.
- In the United States, reference to “sample” indicates the whole population from which respondents were selected/volunteered. However, when using the word “sample” in this text it refers to the respondents participating in the survey, and not the broader population which the sample forms part of.

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Engaging Students is the first comprehensive manuscript on research into student engagement in South African higher education. Each of the chapters has a clear, distinguishable focus and makes an original contribution in and of itself, while retaining the central focus on student engagement. The book provides a rich, informative picture of the current state of student engagement evaluation, while also highlighting challenges and opportunities for future advances. A particular strength of this publication is its emphasis on the importance of taking evidence-based decisions, and showing how the South African Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE) can provide the evidence for well-informed changes in policy and practice in order to enhance student success.

Prof Magda Fourie-Malherbe
Stellenbosch University



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