RESEARCH ARTICLE

It's Time to Unite: A Collaborative Approach to Addressing the Needs of Graduate Students of Colour

Travis C. Smith* & Emily E. Virtue**

Abstract

Higher education administrators often speak of the value of collaboration between student and academic affairs yet there is little empirical evidence of such collaboration. As such, graduate school services and programmes traditionally receive less attention and support than undergraduate programmes. Arguably, deficiencies in those services and programmes expose a need for collaboration, specifically for students of colour. This article explores the experiences of graduate students of colour while examining the barriers in place that tend to hinder their success in graduate school. By addressing these barriers, we present a justification for the need for collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs within graduate education.

Keywords

academic affairs; collaboration; graduate students of colour; student affairs; support

Introduction

In her 2001 piece, Adrianna Kezar explains that while a great emphasis has been placed on collaborations between student and academic affairs, almost no empirical evidence exists to corroborate the assertions that collaborations are worthy endeavours (p. 39). While a national study was conducted to learn more about collaboration, more than fifteen years later, Kezar's statements ring eerily true: institutional leaders discuss the benefits of collaboration between the two "branches", yet little hard evidence (in the form of empirical data) exists to support such practices. There are a variety of factors that suggest collaboration is needed on college campuses. Financial responsibility, reducing duplication of efforts, and meeting the needs of diverse populations are three notable areas that collaboration can address. This article will use the goal of meeting the needs of diverse populations (especially marginalised populations) as a framework for discussing collaboration. Specifically, we will explore the experiences of graduate students of colour while examining the barriers in

* Mr Travis C. Smith is a PhD candidate in Educational Leadership (Higher Education) at Clemson University, South Carolina, U.S.A. Email: travis8@g.clemson.edu

** Dr Emily E. Virtue is a graduate assistant at Clemson University, South Carolina, U.S.A. Email: evirtue@g.clemson.edu

place that tend to hinder their success in graduate school. By addressing these barriers, we present a justification for collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs within graduate education.

History of Student Affairs

The practice of student affairs has been present on college campuses for nearly a century. In the last 90 years, institutions of higher education have transitioned to a more concerted effort to support not only students' academic pursuits but their overall well-being. As colleges and universities shifted from paternalistic, controlling treatment of students to a more personalised approach, undergraduate students' well-being became a primary focus. By the late 20th century, numerous professional organisations for student affairs formed, giving further guidance to professional efforts to support students on college campuses (Schwartz & Stewart, 2017).

During the early decades of the student affairs profession, the responsibilities of student affairs professionals were distinctly separate from academic affairs. Administrators leaned on student affairs professionals to handle personal issues that arose for students while all issues related to academic success were handled by faculty and academic deans. While *The Student Personnel Point of View* documents (American Council on Education, 1937, 1949) outlined the principles and philosophical development of the profession and how it relates to student academic success, many in the academy experienced (and perhaps encouraged) a sort of separation of powers.

As political climates and world events changed, the demographics of enrolled college students changed and leaders of academic and student affairs divisions began to work more closely together. Colleges and university officials realised that more needed to be done with fewer resources and collaboration between the two units became a more pressing demand (Schwartz & Stewart, 2017). Kuh, Schuh and Whitt (1991) demonstrated the need for collaboration between units to better promote student learning and development. Likewise, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) outlined the impact of college in various measures including positive cognitive, financial and developmental outcomes. At the turn of the 21st century, collaboration between the two divisions increased, yet very little has been explored empirically.

There is some empirical and much anecdotal evidence that collaborations exist. Kezar (2001, p. 40) noted that every institution engaged in the national survey on collaboration indicated some form of collaboration, many of which identified their efforts as moderately to very successful. The research on student affairs and academic affairs collaboration is sparse. Discussion of this trend began in earnest in the early 2000s and then waned. Research and interest has grown more recently. Due to the lack of empirical research on collaborations, this article will contain references to what is available in the literature from 2000 to the present. What is demonstrable in the literature is that nearly all efforts at collaboration are done with undergraduate students in mind. We argue that not only does collaboration need to exist (and be researched), but such efforts need to focus on the well-being of graduate students in addition to undergraduates (the demographic that most noticeably benefits from such efforts).

The Need for Collaboration

While many note the need for collaboration on campuses, Bourassa and Kruger (2000) point to the one-sided nature of this need, stating that professionals in student affairs are more vocal about the need compared to their counterparts in academic affairs. Indeed, the increased effort on the part of student affairs professionals to work towards supporting learning environments on campus signalled both the desire and the need for collaboration. For example, joint efforts from the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) led to guiding documents such as *The Student Learning Imperative* and *Learning Reconsidered* (Bourassa & Kruger, 2000, p. 10) which stress the ways in which student affairs programmes and services can augment academic experiences.

The nature of collaboration is particularly difficult when stakeholders do not value the contributions each may bring to the table. Philpott and Strange (2003, p. 81) characterised the relationship between academic and student affairs professionals as "second cousins of the academy", implying that while related, their identities are not fully known and valued. As such, collaboration can be difficult. Numerous articles in the 1990s and early 2000s point to "turf wars" and the stepping-on of toes as significant reasons why collaboration is not successful or sometimes even desired (Love, Kuh, MacKay & Hardy, 1993; Matthews, 1997). Negative beliefs about the abilities of student affairs professionals abound as they are often not considered (by faculty) to be academics in their own right and their services are largely unknown or misunderstood (Kezar, 2017). These misperceptions (despite the increased requirement for advanced degrees in the field of higher education) can lead to a belief that student affairs professionals are unworthy of garnering credit equal to academics for their work with students. One way in which student affairs professionals have sought to ensure their work is research-based and developmentally appropriate for students was the development of the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (commonly referred to as CAS Standards).

CAS Standards were developed in 1986 to guide professional preparation for students in Master's level student affairs programmes (Young & Janosik, 2007, p. 342). Since the introduction of CAS Standards, numerous studies have been completed to assess effectiveness, learning outcomes, and specific competency outcomes (Harrow & Mann, 1996; Herdlein, Klein, Boquard & Haddad, 2010; Young & Elfrink, 1991). Yet, while the CAS Standards guide the preparation of student affairs professionals, Young and Janosik (2007, p. 361) note that little time in graduate study is given to research and that "most programs require no more than one introductory research class". The lack of preparation for understanding and utilising research can cause campus partners (particularly faculty) to feel as though their peers are less qualified to serve students. Student affairs professionals may believe they are competent in providing services but may not feel prepared to assess need or research appropriately to address needs when they are found. This suggests that while there may be a desire to help students, professionals may not be adequately equipped to determine what students' needs are or how to address them. Here, a collaborative partnership might alleviate where student affairs professionals may fall short.

Collaboration as a Benefit to Graduate Students of Colour

Not all college students share the same experiences, especially students of colour pursuing graduate degrees (Flynn, Sanchez & Harper, 2011; Gildersleeve, Croom & Vasquez, 2011; Twale & Weidman, 2016; Ingram, 2013). Maton, et al. (2011) supported previous findings when they examined the similarities and differences between the experiences and perspectives of students of colour and European American students in psychology graduate programmes. Unfortunately, the authors found that students of colour faced greater barriers than the European students, while the African American students reported greater barriers and less cultural diversity than all other groups. Furthermore, Maton, et al. (2011) reported students who were more satisfied identified academic support, access to mentoring, greater cultural diversity in their academic environment and more confidence in obtaining employment as reasons for their satisfaction. These findings show a distinct difference amongst graduate student experiences. On one hand, some students are thriving and actively supported by their professors, peers, departments and universities. Yet, the other populations are experiencing a different world with the lack of support that creates barriers and reinforces systems of oppression.

Similar to the Maton et al.'s (2011) study, Henfield, Woo and Washington (2013) identified challenges of African American graduate students in counselling education programmes. The authors also sought to examine the different aspects that promote successful retention and matriculation. As such, they reported three findings: feelings of isolation, disconnected peers and lack of cultural understanding. In this case, isolation was birthed from the lack of diversity in the student and faculty population. Students spoke of feelings of being alone and being the only one in their setting. In regard to disconnected peers, the participants spoke directly to orientation and the lack of cohesion from the start of the cohort. Orientation, for some students, sets the stage for peer interaction. However, the students expressed their concerns that orientation was primarily used for faculty introduction. Finally, the students reported a lack of cultural understanding from their faculty members. These concerns were rooted in misunderstandings of how the students dressed and the differences in value systems. Hence, academic affairs should partner with student affairs to offer programmes that address these barriers throughout the year. We note that this is only a temporary fix to a deeper systematic issue. If we plan to eradicate the cause of the barrier then both academic affairs and student affairs must work closely with graduate students to change and implement policies that deconstruct the root causes that are embedded deep within the policies of the departments and institutions.

Similar to Maton, et al. (2011), Haskins et al. (2013) sought to identify the experiences of students of colour enrolled in a Master's counselling programme at a predominately white institution. The authors reported five thematic trends as a result of the study:

> a) isolation as a Black student, b) tokenization as a Black student, c) lack of inclusion of Black counselor perspectives within coursework, d) differences between support received by faculty of color and support received by White faculty, and e) access to support from people of color and White peers.   (Haskins et al., 2013, p. 168)

These findings reflect the narrative of some students of colour across the country in graduate education. Particularly in this study, the students reported isolation as a result of being under-represented or not fitting in. They also alluded to not being supported and not having a community to belong to. Again, we see the of lack of support and community arise. This continues to be the trend across higher education for students of colour. In turn, administrators are becoming more aware of this trend and are calling for more collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs in graduate education. Collaboration between the two would assist in providing safe spaces and support for these students. We acknowledge that graduate education differs vastly from undergraduate education. Yet, the need to support students remains the same. We argue that because student affairs can collaborate with academic affairs on the undergraduate level, the same takes place at the graduate level, albeit with the academic and social needs of the graduate student population in mind. These partnerships should play on the expertise of both faculty and staff. For example, some student affairs professionals have a thorough background in a wide array of student development theories. As such, faculty could partner with these professionals to better understand the holistic student and how they operate outside of an academic setting.

Social experiences and development of graduate students of colour have been studied and can promote better faculty understanding of student needs. Johnson–Bailey, Valentine, Cevero and Bowles (2009) researched the types of social experiences of black graduate students at U.S. research institutions. The authors explored the formal and informal interactions between students and their faculty, the reception of the students on campus, and prominent memories of being a graduate student. Unlike the previous studies mentioned, this study included alumni over a 40-year span. Therefore, the authors were able to thoroughly examine the culture and climate of this institution in relation to their graduate students of colour. Johnson–Bailey et al. (2009) reported that students experienced isolation from the university community and programme, routine discrimination, underestimation of academic ability, and loneliness in graduate life. These findings are similar to the current and past trends that have been reported in the literature. Furthermore, the negative experiences from this particular study affected the idea of legacy within a university. The participants commonly expressed their disinterest in sending their children to the university. These results strengthen our assertion that more emphasis should be placed on the collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs. Some of the negative experiences reported in Johnson–Bailey et al. (2009) may have been alleviated by concerted efforts for collaboration of services to graduate students of colour.

Johnson–Bailey et al.'s (2009) findings suggest that services in the form of programming could have changed the outcome for graduate students of colour. According to Pope's (1995) multicultural change intervention matrix, change is the third level of the first order directly following awareness and membership. As noted in Pope's matrix, programming is a function of the institution. The findings of Johnson–Bailey et al.'s (2009) study should be used to implement collaborative programming between student affairs and academic

affairs such as creating academic support groups, introducing social clubs, enforcing cultural trainings for departments, and providing safe spaces for these students.

Graduate education has become increasingly isolated because all of the student support is expected to come from the faculty. This unfair expectation is merely a setup for catastrophe. Faculty members can only do so much given their expectation of writing for publication while maintaining advisor roles, teaching loads, and serving the institution and professional organisations. If we want to truly provide better experiences and more support for our graduate students of colour, then we must promote collaboration across campus lines.

Opportunities and Direction for Collaboration

As Kezar (2017) explains, the most common place to find collaboration is in programmes related to a student's first year: recruitment, orientation and first-year seminars rely heavily on collaboration to succeed. Yet growth in collaboration is evident in such programmes as learning communities, living-learning environments, senior capstone projects and citizenship education (Kezar, 2017, p. 96). Interestingly, Kezar's (2001) earlier work pointed to counselling being an area of commonly successful collaboration (p. 41). Many of these areas have a clear commonality in that they are all focused on the student transition, a time that is stressful for many and requires extensive planning and preparation for administrative staff and faculty alike. It is likely that these collaborations will continue as colleges and universities put great emphasis on recruiting and welcoming students in the hope that these students will be retained until graduation. However, institutional leaders must consider their graduate students and students of colour who are also in transition.

To make collaboration successful Polnariev and Levy (2016, p. 136) argue that collaborations must come after strategic planning:

> The strategic plan is an ideal forum to more cohesively unite activities – pulling them further away from silos and strengthening their connections to other departments and divisions. Effective strategic planning necessitates broad participation and reflects a continuous commitment to collaboratively lead the institution toward achieving its aspirations.

To commence collaboration without first identifying specific outcomes, measures and benchmarks is a disservice to students, staff, and faculty alike. Similarly, strategic planning will build faith in the project, allow stakeholders to address concerns, and ideally serve as a means to create trust amongst members from both sides of the institution. As assessment continues to drive both academic and student affairs endeavours, strategic planning will serve both the short- and long-term needs of the institution.

To respond to the needs of graduate students of colour, assessment and strategic planning must demonstrate a commitment to collaboration. Evans and DeVita (2017, p. 70) assert that "college campuses produce 'chilly' climates for racial and ethnic minorities that contribute to feelings of isolation and loneliness". Such climates must be addressed by administrators in both academic and student affairs. Rather than quickly and haphazardly

responding to immediate needs, faculty and administrators need to come together to better serve this student population. As the literature on collaboration continues to grow, tools for successful collaboration will ensure that positive outcomes are possible.

While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, there are steps that can be taken to help alleviate some of these persisting issues. For example, Clemson University has implemented a new initiative, titled Grad 360. This initiative focuses on nine core areas that are designed to "strengthen your existing skills and develop new competencies relevant to your academic and professional goals" (Grad 360, 2017, para. 1). The programme is housed in the Graduate School yet the sessions are outsourced across campus, from academic and student affairs professionals. The nine components of this programme are: career development and exploration; social and global responsibility; research and innovation; professionalism and ethics; leadership and management; teamwork and collaboration; teaching and learning; oral, written and intercultural communication; and personal health, wellness and financial literacy. Programmes such as Grad 360 can offer a place outside of classrooms and departments in which students can seek support. Although there has not been any substantial research conducted on the outcomes of this particular programme, we see this initiative as a prime example of collaboration.

Challenges to Collaboration

Kezar (2001, p. 47) noted that the largest challenges to collaboration are lack of faculty and staff time, disciplinary ties, faculty resistance and lack of established goals. Depending on the campus culture, such challenges may be overcome or serve as an impasse. Cho and Sriram (2016) noted that while the competency level of student affairs staff does not significantly impact the collaboration process, the culture of collaboration on a campus could predict the outcome. For example, on campuses where collaboration has been established for some time or valued in even small efforts, larger collaborations might be more welcomed by stakeholders. Cho and Sriram (2016) also noted that institution type may play a role in whether collaboration efforts are effective. The recent literature on student affairs and academic affairs collaboration suggests that certain institution types may lend themselves to collaboration better than others. This is certainly reflected in literature related to collaboration at community colleges (Frost et al., 2010; Gulley & Mullendore, 2014; Gulley, 2015; Ozaki & Hornack, 2014). In addition to institutional type, budgetary concerns may foster greater collaborative efforts.

As recent studies have shown, funding for higher education, specifically state-level funding, has decreased significantly in the last decade (Mitchell, Palacios & Leachman, 2014; Oliff, Palacios, Johnson & Leachman, 2013). Though American institutions of higher education are now rebounding from recession cuts, some states have failed to increase budgets and, in some cases, continue to cut funding (Mitchell et al., 2014). Thus, those working in both academic and student affairs are continually pressured to do more with less. Collaboration efforts that address not only student needs but budgetary considerations might find favour amongst more leaders in divisions that often do not work well together.

Assessment of services and programmes offered across campus would shed light on where efforts to support are duplicated, demonstrating where financial cuts may be made without loss to the student experience. Leaders on campus might consider how combining efforts might better serve not only their students but also their budgetary bottom line. As the literature on collaboration continues to grow, tools for successful collaboration will ensure that positive outcomes are possible.

Faculty and staff should partner together to create intentional programmes that serve as interdisciplinary support hubs for students. These collaborations could be done in a variety of ways such as writing groups across disciplines; interdisciplinary lunch and lectures to discuss current innovative research happening throughout the campus; interdisciplinary creative inquiry teams to work on grant proposals; or even social networking events in conjunction with the various commissions and professional entities on campus. These programmes should create a welcoming space for all students regardless of their discipline. Should this happen, departments would no longer have to bare the total fiscal responsibility for programming. By partnering together, departments should be able maximise the use of departmental funds, thereby expanding the number of programmes and services offered to graduate students.

Conclusion

The need for collaboration between student and academic affairs will only continue over time. As resources dwindle, expectations for institutions increase and student needs change. Collaboration could very likely be a factor that keeps institutional doors open. While all students can benefit from increased collaboration, it is crucial that institutions remember their graduate student populations as deserving of services. The potential loss of the often-forgotten graduate student population could have dramatic effects on an institution. If graduate students do not feel supported and heard, they will take their growing expertise and gifts elsewhere (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009). Institutions of higher education that wish to keep their doors open to all students would do well to support those who may become future leaders in higher education. As institutions work to better support graduate students of colour on campus, systemic and historical practices of institutions must also be considered. Collaborative efforts can only go so far: graduate students and students of colour must also see institutional dedication to eradicating the systems in place that prevent their full engagement on campus.

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