

Student Affairs in Nigerian Higher Education: Examining the Program and the Profession

^[1] Anidobe, Ozioma Marvis

^[1] The University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

Abstract— *The Student Affairs Division is a necessity in every higher education institution. Having existed for decades, the division continues to prove its relevance in the higher education system. Currently, the Student Affairs Division has become a solid professional body because of its firm integration into the higher education systems of various countries. However, while the student affairs division has been firmly integrated into the higher education system of many countries, some still face challenges in strengthening the foundation and effectiveness of the division. As a result, the students and the institutions in the deficient countries suffer ripple effects in the form of social vices, ill health, terminated dreams, campus cult, and associated implications. This paper explores the student affairs program and professional practice in Nigeria. It examines the effects, lapses, and challenges of this division in the Nigerian higher education system relative to the American educational system to which the student affairs division owes its origin. The paper finally suggests plausible ways to firmly improve the functionality of the student affairs division in Nigeria so as to effectively meet the respective needs of students and institutions while simultaneously maintaining order in the higher education system.*

Keywords: *student affairs, higher education administration, practice versus profession, Counseling and Career Services, institutional values, and campus culture.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian tertiary education system has a student affairs division. Of course, there is generally a dean of student affairs alongside subordinate staff who attend to the needs of students. However, a scrutiny of this division exposes a lot of lapses that should be addressed for the effectiveness of this division in Nigerian higher education institutions. The lapses range from the fundamental requirements of professionalism to the availability and accessibility of student affairs services available in higher education systems. In other words, the student affairs division in Nigeria lacks professionalism. Consequently, some necessary services are unavailable while the few services offered are rarely accessible to students. This study explores the student affairs professional practice in Nigeria. The paper first presents an overview of the student affairs program and highlights the various functional areas and competencies in the program. This information served as the basis for examining the student affairs profession in Nigeria such that the lapses in this division were identified and possible solutions suggested. Finally, recommendations were made on how to address the lack of professionalism in the student affairs division in Nigerian higher education institutions.

II. AN OVERVIEW OF THE STUDENT AFFAIRS PROGRAM AND PROFESSION

Student Affairs is a program that prepares individuals for a profession in the student affairs division. The student affairs division, on the other hand, is a unit in higher educational institutions that caters to the general needs of students. This

unit ideally consists of student affairs professionals in various competencies and functional areas who work hard to meet the needs of students. According to Iyayi (2017:1):

Student affairs management refers to all measures undertaken by institutions towards meeting their students' needs, including the safety of lives and property, a conducive atmosphere for learning, and all extracurricular activities within and to some extent outside the institution's precincts.

Iyayi's definition generalizes the purpose of the student affairs division but captures some basic roles of the division. Within the student affairs division, there are various competencies and functional areas that address and seek to provide solutions to the unique needs of students. For example, students in need of housing are catered for by the residence hall supervisor. In the same way, issues relating to students' color and cultural diversity are managed by the Office of Student Life, Diversity, and Leadership (SLDL). The needs of low-income students or students with other financial needs are managed by the financial aid unit and so on. There are multiple functional areas under the student affairs division and their purpose is to serve students better and guide them through their academic journey. It is also important to note that while Student Affairs professionals aim to serve students better, they also thrive to maintain and keep abreast of the values and campus culture of the institution where they work. As a result, the student affairs division is best described as a bridge between the institution and its students. The student affairs professionals interface with students to meet their educational/personal needs and in the process; they preserve institutional values by maintaining social justice and ensuring the maintenance of school rules among students. This way, a balance is created between the

needs of students and the needs of the institution they learn in.

The Student Affairs profession has witnessed an evolution over time in the American higher education system. As a result, this paper examines the practice of the student affairs profession in Nigeria using the American experience as a major reference point. Thereafter, recommendations would be made on ways to develop the profession better in the Nigerian higher education system.

III. THE HISTORY OF STUDENT AFFAIRS

Although the student affairs profession is practiced in institutions around the world, it owes its incubation as a profession to the United States, and more specifically, to the formation of the dean of women in the 1890s. Marion Talbot had succeeded Alice Freeman Palmer as dean and, in line with Palmer's goals, Marion saw to the needs of female students in the then male-dominated academic era. The profession since then has evolved over the years through various influences and innovations of pioneer leaders. Today, the profession owes its most significant transition and recognition to Thomas Arkle Clark for his reforms during his tenure as the Northwestern president. He applied his personnel psychology ideas to student life and dismissed the dean of men and of women, replacing them with a campus personnel unit. The personnel office had adopted an individualist approach toward each student which helped them to effectively address the student's needs. To involve women in the unit, Esther McDonald was appointed right after her graduation specifically because of the interest she had in personnel psychology and the fact that "she understood the importance of connecting the student with the institution through not only academics but also student activities" (Robert Schwartz and Dafina-Lazarus Stewart in Schuh, Jones, and Torres, 2017, p. 70)

Under Clark's leadership, the student affairs unit attended to individual students' needs in line with institutional values and campus culture. Today, student affairs is a broad profession that addresses various aspects of student life including their financial needs, housing, academic needs, social needs, career advice, and security as well as issues relating to student diversity, access and inclusion, and so much more. The student affairs profession is, therefore, best described as a bridge between an institution and its students. Though it originated in America, today, the profession has spread across various institutions in the United States and beyond. The student affairs profession is presently practiced in countries around the world including European countries, Asian countries, and African countries. The profession has two leading organizations in America namely: the American College Personnel Administration (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). There are also student affairs professional organizations in other countries. Some of them include the Asia Pacific

Student Services Association (APSSA) in China, the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS) in Canada, the South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP) in Africa, and many more.

Competencies and Functional Areas in the Student Affairs Division

There are various competencies and functional areas that fall under the student affairs division. Iyayi (2017, p.2) highlights the following as areas that fall within the functions of the Students Affairs department:

- Students' orientation
- Students' accommodation
- Hostel services and management
- Students' Association
- Students' Union Government
- Students' Union Government Election Counseling and Career Services
- Special services for Students with Special Needs
- Regulations and Protection of Students' rights
- Students' Disciplinary Matters
- Security of Life and Proper

Wilson in Schuh, Jones, and Torres (2017: 400), further highlights 40 functional areas developed by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) in 2015. Preceding the functional areas highlighted by Iyayi (2017), Manning, Kinkier, and Schuh (2014), had enumerated ten student affairs competencies and the basic knowledge, skill, and disposition required for each of them.

The ten competencies include:

- Advising and supporting
- Assessment, evaluation, and research
- Law, policy, and governance
- Leadership
- Organizational and Human Resources
- Personal and Ethical Foundations
- Social Justice and Inclusion
- Values, Philosophy, and History
- Student Learning and Development
- Technology

{Manning, Kinkier and Schuh (2014) as in Schuh, Jones, and Torres, (2017) p. 380-382}

Practice versus Profession: Understanding the Student Affairs Profession

To proceed in this study, it is important to establish the difference between practice and profession. Profession comes from the root word *profess* which means to declare openly or affirm allegiance to knowledge claims. A group of practitioners within a profession is known as professionals. These practitioners engage in narrow fieldwork through which they share an identity. Professional Identity involves the constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in which people define themselves in a particular

professional role (Schuh, Jones, and Torres, 2017). Therefore, to be recognized as a professional, there is a need to create a professional identity within the profession one is involved in.

Every profession involves practice. Practice adds up to the experience expected from professionals. A medical doctor, for example, must practice in his field to be recognized as a doctor; the same is applicable to a lawyer, a nurse, an accountant, etc. In the same way, a student affairs professional must practice in a division or functional area to be recognized as student affairs professional. In other words, practice validates a profession. It is through practice that professionalism thrives. However, to ensure effective practice within a profession, individuals involved must first have knowledge of the profession. Sadly, this is not the case in the Nigerian student affairs division. Most student affairs practitioners in Nigerian higher education institutions are not professionals. They skip the professional learning process and jump into practice which is against the ethical order of any profession. This issue has posed a big challenge in Nigerian institutions and will be addressed further in this paper.

What does it take to be a Student Affairs Professional?

An observation of the progression of every profession reveals four basic requirements needed to develop professionalism and professional identity in a field. I call them the four ladders toward professional identity and these four steps strongly apply to the student affairs profession too. They include Knowledge, Experience, Skill, and Dedication

Knowledge: To acquire the knowledge needed for an entry-level into the student affairs profession, a master's degree is required in one of these programs: higher education administration, college student personnel administration, educational leadership, college student affairs, and college student development. According to Long (2012), many of these programs are offered through colleges or schools of education. Long further explained that each program focuses on core skills and competencies like communication, leadership, counseling, administration, etc. For higher positions like dean and associate dean positions, directors of housing and residential life, academic advising, student unions, career services, admissions, and financial aid, a doctoral degree is required for practice.

Experience: From the entry level of the student affairs division, experiences begin to accumulate. The student affairs program gives room for practicum experience while knowledge is being gathered. At this stage, students are called emerging professionals or new professionals. However, as they proceed in their career, more experience is built and soon they become experienced professionals. The experiences gathered over years of practice add up to their professionalism.

Skill: Skills validate professionalism. Student affairs practitioners face various needs, and these needs evolve as

the days go by. For an individual to be identified as a student affairs professional, there are skills that they should possess that can be applied to manage unforeseen situations. Student affairs professionals are expected to be proactive, and this requires skills like listening skills, counseling skills, organizational skills, communication skills, etc. New professionals may not possess enough skills at the entry-level of their career but with the requisite knowledge they have, and the experience they are building upon, they tend to develop critical skills with which they address crucial situations in the future.

Dedication: As earlier indicated, professionals are a group of practitioners who engage in narrow fieldwork and share an identity. To be identified as a professional, therefore, there is a need to stay dedicated to the profession you identify with. Dedication is seen in the loyalty and contributions of individuals to promote their profession. Student affairs professionals have challenges they face in their various institutions. Some of their challenges include recognition, statistical proof of their contributions towards student success, funding, etc. It takes dedicated professionals to seek ways to address these challenges. According to Eaton (2014), one of the functions of student affairs educators is to challenge the academic curriculum, pedagogy, and practice of higher education. This, however, cannot be achieved if there is a lack of dedicated professionals.

Generally, every student affairs division should be made up of professionals who meet up to these four requirements to ensure the smooth and effective running of the division. In the Nigerian education system, however, these requirements are not met by student affairs practitioners. Most practitioners are not even professionals and as a result, there is an imbalance and lag in the aspect of meeting the needs of students and the needs of the institution.

Student Affairs Division in Nigerian Higher Education

According to Iyayi (2017), in the early years of higher education in Nigeria, the student affairs division was headed by the Deputy Registrar who reported directly to the Registrar. In recent times, however, because of incessant crises and school closures; an academic staff of the highest rank is made the dean of the student affairs division. Iyayi explains that the dean works together with the registry and its subordinate staff to manage the student affairs unit. In close agreement with Iyayi, Ogunode (2021) adds that the dean of student affairs (also known as the overall chief executive of the division) stands as the representative in all matters affecting students' welfare and discipline and is assisted by a deputy and a student affairs officer. In cases where advisory is needed, units like the Guidance and Counseling department are consulted. On the contrary, Iyayi posits that students do not take advantage of these units and in cases where they do, it is most times discovered that the problem in question is already in a critical stage.

It is important to note that in every institution, student affairs services are inevitable. This is because, whether or not a student affairs unit exists within an institution, students' needs must be addressed. If a conflict arises among students, for example, someone has to step in to resolve it and avoid an escalation. Students in need of campus housing must be attended to. Crimes among students must face disciplinary actions and so on. Students have various needs to be met and in the absence of a student affairs division, proper management of these needs becomes problematic. In Nigeria, for example, students face challenges related to poor finances, insecurity of various kinds, cultism, depression, etc. These challenges not only affect students but the institution as well. A professional student affairs division is, therefore, a necessity in Nigerian higher education institutions. This way, issues affecting students and the institution can be resolved better. It is true that Nigerian higher education institutions have student affairs units, however, these units are best described as band-aids because they may manage certain issues temporarily, but they lack the professional skill needed to address the root of these challenges.

Some Challenges facing the Nigerian Higher Education system

Just like every other higher education institution, the Nigerian higher education system faces many challenges. However, unlike the institutions in some other countries, Nigerian institutions lack defined structures to address their challenges which are inevitable. As the years go by, human experiences evolve, and this evolution introduces new challenges. About a century ago, technology was not a trend therefore, issues like cybercrime, cyber-bullying, malpractices, etc were not addressed by student affairs professionals because they were problems that did not exist. Today the case is different. The percentage of students entangled in technology creates problems and this doubles with the constant rise in technological innovations. The implication is that for every higher education institution in the world, there are student problems to be managed, and while these are being addressed new problems tend to emerge. The challenges faced in Nigeria's higher education are not far different from the ones faced in higher education institutions in other countries. What makes the difference is the structures put in place to manage these problems.

Problems will always exist, and these problems tend to cause hitches in the smooth running of the higher education system. These hitches do not only affect students, but the institution in general, therefore, it is necessary that a solid student affairs division is established to manage and address these challenges as they arise.

Iyayi (2017:3) mentions some major challenges faced in Nigerian higher education institutions which affect students' experience, the student affairs unit, and the institution in extension. They include:

1. Inadequate students accommodation
2. Cultism and insecurity on campuses
3. Drugs use and other demeaning activities
4. Consistent clash between Student Union Government and the institution
5. Inadequate basic amenities like water, electricity, etc
6. Feeding

Similarly, Nwite (2016) conducted research on student personnel services in some colleges of education in Nigeria, and in his statement of the problem, he also mentioned some challenges faced in Nigerian colleges of education and it is appalling what students must face because they are not being provided for. These challenges were tied to the non-availability, inadequacy, and poor quality of some vital student personnel services. Some of the challenges enumerated by Nwite (2016) are as follows:

1. Students have been reported to repeat a semester or even an academic year because the records of results of exams they wrote and passed got lost.
2. Students stand outside to receive lectures because the lecture rooms are insufficient.
3. Library resources are insufficient including reading tables and chairs for students.
4. Student toilet ends are bad and stinking. This affects their hygiene and makes them seek other unhealthy ways to relieve themselves.
5. Student surroundings are bushy, attracting snake bites and other poisonous encounters.
6. Hostel accommodations are inadequate and in a poor state of repair. In addition, the rooms are overcrowded.
7. In some colleges, students either cook inside their rooms or depend on food vendors for their feeding because catering services are not available to them.
8. Students buy their water because some institutions depend on water tankers for the supply of water.
9. Security is poor causing a rise in cases of rape, murder, theft, robbery, and cult activities.
10. Medical facilities are ill-equipped. Drugs are inadequate except for routine drugs.
11. Guidance and counseling services are non-existent in most colleges of education, and student records are haphazardly kept.
12. Hostels are built in the form of dormitories (without rooms) and are crowded with students accommodated unofficially (p. 86);

In addition to these, Nwite carried out a survey on a population of 770 final-year students and staff of the student affairs division from federal and state colleges in the southeastern region of Nigeria. He used questionnaires for data collection and his findings confirmed that there was a general lack of health services, accommodation, and guidance services in both federal and state colleges (Nwite,

2016L 92-95).

Challenges of the Student Affairs Profession in Nigerian Higher Education Institutions and Possible Solutions

Every scholar cited in this work agrees that student affairs and personnel services serve as a catalyst toward addressing the challenges in higher education and promoting effective teaching and learning such that students can have a smooth campus experience. Scholars addressing student affairs services in Nigeria also collectively agree that this division has received very little attention in higher education professional literature and social administration. There is no doubt that student affairs are the most reliable channel through which these problems facing Nigerian higher education can be solved.

In the Nigerian situation, however, having a student affairs division does not solve student and institutional challenges. It is the strength of the unit that makes the difference, and this is where the biggest challenge in Nigerian higher education surfaces. This section discusses the challenges facing the student affairs profession in Nigerian Higher Education Institutions and possible solutions to address them.

Unavailability of student affairs as a course of study

In Nigeria, the student affairs program is not offered as a course of study. This is the root of the shortfall being experienced in the division. It is through education that knowledge is gained and through knowledge, professional skills are formed and applied. The unavailability of a student affairs program as a Nigerian higher education degree program can therefore be considered the biggest challenge of the division. Until this problem is resolved, there will be a lack of professionalism as far as the Nigerian student affairs division is concerned. To resolve this issue, there is a need for the National Universities Commission to review the programs available in higher education institutions to create room for student affairs programs. Today, there are a couple of scholars in Nigeria that have undergone this course in foreign universities and are well-equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to practice in this field. These few can be employed as educators in the field as this will enhance the emergence of new professionals.

Lack of professional Practitioners in the Field

The unavailability of student affairs as a course in Nigeria, explains this second problem to a great extent. However, even in the absence of a student affairs course of study, there are other ways to ensure that professionals are part of the system. First, they could be employed from other countries to head the division such that they can guide subordinate staff on the right actions to take in certain situations. Secondly, current practitioners who lack the requisite professional knowledge for running the division can engage in professional training and development. This can be achieved through the organization of seminars, and workshops for

practitioners in the division. Lastly, current practitioners should participate in student affairs conferences organized by top student affairs organizations. This way, even without earning a certificate of learning in the field, current practitioners can be equipped with the necessary professional skills needed to discharge their duties effectively. It is sad however that none of these measures is being put in place for current practitioners. Therefore, the division continues to lack professionals.

Lack of student affairs professional bodies

In Nigeria, there are no professional bodies or organizations for student affairs practitioners. Professional bodies create a forum for review and improvement. They are also responsible for setting professional standards and ethics. The availability of professional bodies furthermore enhances professional development. In other countries like the United States, Canada, Asia, and South Africa, there are professional bodies that tailor their affairs. In the United States, for example, ACPA and NASPA are the leading professional bodies that manage the affairs of the division across the country and even beyond. Today, NASPA has grown beyond the United States as they influence the student affairs units in many other countries. In the absence of a relevant professional body here in Nigeria, It is suggested that the deans of student affairs in Nigerian higher education institutions should come together and form a professional association. While this association grows in strength and recognition, it should identify with bigger professional organizations like NASPA in the United States and in other countries. This way, there will be a gradual growth in the professionalism of the student affairs division in Nigeria.

Other Nigerian scholars like Onyike (2013), Ogunode (2021), and Ojo et al (2017) amongst others, have identified similar challenges in the student affairs division in the Nigerian higher education system. They have also proffered possible solutions to address these challenges. If the suggestions of these scholars as well as the suggestions presented in this paper can be practically considered, then the grounds of this field yet to be explored here in Nigeria would be broken.

IV. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper attempted to identify the problems facing the Nigerian Student Affairs Division. It has also discussed possible solutions to the problems. In addition, the challenges of students in Nigerian higher education institutions have been highlighted with reference to the findings of scholars like Nwite (2016) and Iyayi (2017). An overview of the student affairs profession, functional areas, and competencies has also been presented, and based on the findings of this exploration, the following general recommendations are made:

- Student affairs should be introduced as a course in the Nigerian Higher education system
- Current practitioners should embark on professional development
- To enhance professional development, current practitioners and new professionals should identify with organizations like NASPA and ACPA.
- The student affairs division in tertiary institutions in Nigeria should be expanded to accommodate different competencies and units to address various student and institutional needs.
- Students should be orientated on how to access student affairs services
- Students should be advised on what office to reach out to for help without being afraid of being turned down.
- Students should feel safe in their campus space and around student affairs professionals
- In the absence of government funding, partnerships can be built with external organizations and companies to address the problem of the lack of basic amenities on campus.
- Provisions should be made for students from low-income homes to access education through financial aid packages. When funding is not available for this, on-campus jobs should be introduced for students who wish to support their education. The partnerships with companies and private organizations can also be leveraged to create financial support programs for students.

V. CONCLUSION

As seen in the history of student affairs, the establishment of a field is not always easy. It took years for the student affairs division to become what it is in America today. Being the pioneer country to create a solid student affairs structure, the United States has set a standard for upcoming student affairs units in other countries. Change is inevitable and because growth is a continuous process influenced by change, growth should be inevitable too. What this is meant is that as time changes, students' adjustment needs and professional services evolve. As a result, even in well-developed countries, the student affairs unit is still undergoing change. It is, therefore, never too late to kick-start the growth process. On this note, the Nigerian Student affairs unit should kick-start its growth process taking the suggested measures in this paper into consideration.

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