

1 September 2016

Division Student Affairs helps to shape new Stellenbosch University

Dear Colleague

The Division Student Affairs (STA) has been involved in a wave of exciting conversations at SU, not only among students but also among staff. I joined the STA team in January this year, and I have come to know an emerging university that is finding its place in the new South African and African higher education landscape.

What strikes me is not only that original conversations are taking place; in these widely varying conversations, a range of voices from different spaces are willing to explore difficult themes in courageous ways.

The many #movements reflect this flow of discussion. It has sparked critical reviews of our practices and assumptions, and we welcome the assertion that we live in a pluralist society where all voices and opinions must be validated and affirmed. We need to recognise that South Africa has a traumatic past, which requires that we find ways to honour our past and present experiences without letting them detract from our resolve to shape a better future for all South Africans.

At STA we strive to keep this tension alive and to deliver students who can respond positively to the challenges within SU as well as the broader society. We focus on assisting students to develop into successful, responsible and responsive citizens who can recognise and act on social injustices wherever they find themselves. Therefore, we view #feesmustfall and #rapeculture as positive activism that will contribute towards shared solutions to problems that impact all of us.

The Task Team on Rape Culture has engaged a wide range of colleagues and student leaders from various spaces, and our investigation of the culture underpinning gender violence has sparked many changes. We are working on recommendations and we hope that every SU staff member and student will take up the challenge to change our thinking about violence and gender.

Another exciting development is the addition of a hub for SU residences, which will allow even more commuter students to benefit from residence and campus life. The various engagement opportunities offered by residence and campus life contribute towards SU students developing graduate attributes and awareness of what it means to be an active and engaged citizen – whether at SU, in South Africa or in the continental-African-global community. These co-curricular activities and experiences form part of the holistic development of our students (comprehensively recorded in the second transcript).

We are conducting research into students' institutional engagement practices, which we will apply to improve students' sense of belonging at SU and to enable their full participation in institutional life.

The Unit for Equality focuses on equality, fairness and addressing discrimination and harassment. The service has been used widely by staff and students, which is very satisfying. The staff at the Unit are keenly involved in handling incidences of discrimination and in changing the underlying factors that enable social injustice and inequities in the campus environment as well as broader social spaces.

We are very excited about the establishment of a third Centre within STA. In addition to the Centre for Student Communities (CSC; headed by Mr Pieter Kloppers) and the Centre for Student Counselling and Development (CSCD; headed by Dr Munita Dunn-Coetzee), we now have the Centre for Student Leadership and Structures, which is directed by the Dean of Students, Ms Tonia Overmeyer. Together we will contribute to shaping the institutional culture and climate in order to promote student leadership, engagement, development and participation in the co-curricular experience.

This weekend over 1 200 students will take part in our student leadership development event, SU Leads, which is one among many institutional, regional, national and international events that STA hosts to promote student and institutional success. The upcoming Global Summit on Student Affairs and Services

and the Southern African Congress on Student Affairs are further examples of events aimed at developing our thinking, research and practices in higher education student affairs.

New notions are emerging of what it means to be an African university, and I am fascinated to see how they accelerate conversations on SU campuses.

Kind regards

Dr Birgit Schreiber

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