

Caribbean Student Services Practitioners' Contributions to Higher Education's Mission

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Abstract

Although student services has existed in the Caribbean as a professional community since the 1990s, few written theories describe the nature of student services work in the Caribbean. A lack of theories can pose challenges for socialising new student services practitioners into the profession. Using a decolonising methodological approach, I use this qualitative study to answer the research question: "How do student services practitioners use their understanding of holistic development to serve the purposes of higher education in the Caribbean?" Student services practitioners use their holistic development philosophy to develop students' employability and contribute to students' academic success. They also advocate for making their institutions more student-centred. These findings demonstrate student services practitioners engage in institutional work enacting agency to identify strategies to shape institutional practices (Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2011).

Keywords: institutional work, student services practitioners, holistic development

Introduction

In the Caribbean, student services practitioners' work is undergirded by a holistic development philosophy (Close 2010; Reynolds 2007). Holistic development extends learning beyond the classroom to include the skills students develop outside of the classroom and the attitudes they develop through socialisation

(Reynolds 2007). Student services' holistic development philosophy aligns with higher education goals in the Caribbean as government policies have noted that university graduates should have a set of skills and characteristics beyond academic knowledge to meet the human resources needs of the region's developing economies (Close 2010; Jules and Arnold 2021; Reynolds 2005, 2007). Holistic development provides students with the cognitive skills, interpersonal skills, and understanding of self which are necessary for working and living in a diverse society (Reynolds 2007).

Student services practitioners achieve these goals by implementing programmes to facilitate student development outside the classroom (Pope, Finney, and Bare 2019). Programmes may mimic an academic setting in the form of a workshop or seminar which teaches students a particular skill or develops a particular characteristic in the student. For instance, leadership development seminars may teach students how to run a meeting and motivate their colleagues (Reynolds 2007). Alternatively, programmes can also be experiential learning opportunities that allow students to develop soft skills and attitudes which are not taught formally in the classroom. For example, participating in a team sport can provide students with interpersonal skills (Reynolds 2005). Additionally, student services practitioners facilitate learning through mentoring students (Paterson and Hutchinson 2019). Despite the importance of holistic learning to student services within the Caribbean, since the early 2000s, there has been little guidance in the academic literature on how student services practitioners should implement this philosophy in the Caribbean. This article addresses this gap by presenting how student services practitioners use holistic learning to achieve their institutional goals. It also discusses how these findings show that a case management model best supports higher education students in the Caribbean.

Significance of the Study

This article is a form of theory making for Caribbean student services and aims at improving student service practice in the Caribbean. The foundation for effective student services work lies in the ability of practitioners to interpret a theory and use that interpretation to form practical steps for programming and interactions with students (Pope, Finney, and Bare 2019). However, in the Caribbean, there is a lack of research about student services practitioners' use of theory in their work, and inconsistencies remain in how student services is practised

(Phillips 2020). These inconsistencies can hinder the development of a quality experience for students because some students are supported well, and others do not receive adequate support (Phillips 2020). To create consistent approaches in student services practice, researchers and practitioners can engage in consensus building about how student services is practised (Torres, Jones, and Renn 2019). Consensus creates clear messages about what is good practice (Torres, Jones, and Renn 2019). Identifying good practice is foundational for training professionals to improve their work (Torres, Jones, and Renn 2019). The lack of theorisation about Caribbean student services practice has been an obstacle to maximising the impact of student services in the region. By describing how practitioners use theory in their work, this article contributes to the ongoing consensus-building efforts for student services practice within the region.

Theoretical Framework: Institutional Work

Furthermore, by centring the work of student services practitioners, the findings from this study provide insight into how institutions can support students. The work to support students at an institution can be studied in an institution-centric or a worker-centric manner (Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2011). In an institution-centric manner, the institution's ideologies and structures determine the success of the organisation (Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2011). A worker-centric framework shifts the focus from a macro-level approach to a micro-level one (Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2011). Workers have agency, which they use to determine the ideology and structure of institutions (Battilana and D'ahunno 2009). I have chosen a worker-centric framework to understand how higher education institutions support students in their learning. Workers can understand the ideologies of their organisation, make conscious decisions about whether to enact those ideologies in their daily actions, and determine how to disrupt or reinscribe those ideologies (Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2011). Workers' agency allows them to engage in institutional work, which is an intentional effort to accomplish a goal (Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2011). This study shows practitioners' intentionality or what they aimed to do in their work. To understand student services practitioners' effort, this study identifies actions toward achieving these aims.

This article describes the findings from a recent qualitative study which answers the research question: "How do student services practitioners use their understanding of holistic development to serve the purposes of higher education in

the Caribbean?” The findings from this study demonstrate that student services practitioners use their holistic development philosophy to serve two higher education goals: developing students' employability and fostering students' academic success. They also perceived that their institutions aimed to be student-centred, and holistic development shaped their advocacy to make their institutions more student-centred. Based on the findings from this study, I propose a model that institutions can use to scale up practitioners' efforts to an institutional level.

Methodology

This study is grounded on a decolonising research principle: The absence of written theory does not preclude the existence of theory within practice (Smith 1999). Although there is limited written research about how to approach student services work in the Caribbean, practitioners can still construct knowledge by reflecting on their practice individually and in collective spaces, such as professional organisations (McKittrick 2021). The role of the researcher in a decolonising approach to research is to provide opportunities for practitioners to reflect on their practice collectively and as individuals (Nakhid-Chatoor et al. 2018). This study aimed to enhance understanding of the collective meaning that student services practitioners hold about the role of student services work in Caribbean higher education institutions (Nakhid-Chatoor et al. 2018). Identifying collective meanings is a path to theory-making, which will serve the purpose of building consensus.

This study followed purposeful and snowballing sampling to recruit individuals who had participated in previous professional development activities (such as attending professional conferences) for this study (Patton 2015). One focus group and six interviews with student services practitioners working in Jamaica, Trinidad, and The Bahamas were conducted for this study. Twelve practitioners participated in the focus group. Three of those twelve participated in follow-up interviews, and three additional participants participated only in an interview.

Data analysis

Because collective meanings about student services practice are created at the regional level, this study adopts a regional approach to data analysis. The Anglophone Caribbean's shared colonial history, continued political alliances, and

regional approaches to education make the Caribbean region an appropriate analytical unit for localising education research (Knight 2012; Louisy 2001). A regional approach is even more appropriate for theorisation about student services due to the role the regional professional organisation plays in making theories about student development. As the primary driver of professional development for Caribbean student services practitioners, the Caribbean Tertiary Level Personnel Association functions as a community of practice; practitioners share across country borders the best approaches to their work and apply strategies from other Caribbean countries to their work locally (Gupta Supersad 2022; Lave 2011).

Audio recordings and transcripts of the interviews and focus group were reviewed during and after data collection using coding and memoing to record collective meanings which were identified in participants' stories (Santana et al. 2019; Nakhid-Chatoor et al. 2018; Bhattacharya 2015). Audio recordings of the focus group discussions were analyzed to identify points where participants agreed with each other (Nakhid-Chatoor et al. 2018), and especially when other focus group members offered their colleagues verbal affirmations and indicated that they would like to share a similar story. Professional jargon, which participants used to communicate with one another without defining the word's meaning, was also identified during the focus group and further explored during the individual interviews to understand these concepts' meaning and importance for participants.

The data were analyzed to identify cohesive meanings across participants (Nakhid-Chatoor et al. 2018). Instead of viewing each participant as an individual case, I analyzed the individual stories together as one unit to identify how the stories collectively pointed to an understanding of the concepts in question. The lessons learned from each participant's story were used to interpret other participants' stories, allowing for the identification of consistent themes across the interviews and the focus group (Mazzei 2014; Augustine 2014). This analytical approach also informed the data collection. Participants were asked follow-up questions based on stories that other participants told during previous interviews and within the focus group.

Relationality

Qualitative researchers often include a positionality statement to acknowledge how their biases influenced the findings (Jones, Torres, and Arminio 2013). This practice of showing bias as a weakness of the research is a remnant of the positivist approach to research (Patel 2016; St. Pierre 2020). Positivist views on research

place the method as the avenue for understanding how the research is produced, and the researcher should seek to control their bias (Patel 2016). Relationality, on the other hand, offers that all research is made through a person, and two researchers using the same method may produce different findings, due to their personal experiences and viewpoints (Patel 2016). Relationality differs from positionality because relationality positions the researchers' biases as something which enriches the research rather than diminishes the quality (Patel 2016). For this reason, I describe¹ my role in shaping the findings. My interest in Caribbean decolonisation guides this study with a foundational belief that Caribbean people are inherently capable, existing in countries whose challenges result from a lack of material resources due to centuries of wealth extraction. This perspective led to identifying the strengths of the approaches to student services practice, which participants discussed in their interviews.

A discussion of relationality also draws attention to how qualitative researchers often code statements that the researcher finds puzzling (Brinkmann 2014). I migrated to the USA from the Caribbean during high school, so my experiential knowledge of student affairs² is limited to the USA. In the USA, student affairs practitioners are socialised to protect the institution and the student (Harrison 2010). However, it is not always possible to protect both in practice, and in the USA, when practitioners advocate for their students, they risk being reprimanded by their institutions (Harrison 2010). The absence of any mention of this ethical dilemma in the interviews and focus group struck me; I identified the advocacy theme during the analysis when I sought to understand why participants did not speak about this dilemma (Rosiek and Heffernan 2014).

Contextualisation

The ideas which participants discuss in an interview are a product of the context in which they live and work (Patel 2016). In this study, the data were analyzed to understand how participants' context produced the perspectives participants shared during their interviews. The literature review which I present in the next two sections, where I describe current challenges for Caribbean higher education, provides context for this study. I explain that increased access to higher education has resulted in a greater need to support students' employability and describe the steps institutions have taken to meet this need. Additionally, most students at Caribbean universities show signs of poor mental health. Addressing

students' poor mental health is necessary to maximise academic success among all students. Understanding these challenges will help make meaning of student services practitioners' use of a holistic development philosophy.

Developing Students' Employability

In the 21st century, Caribbean countries shifted towards increasing access to higher education, which brought a need to prepare students for high skilled jobs (Blair 2012; Cumberbatch 2020). The need for a highly-skilled workforce brought this shift towards mass access to tertiary education (Maynard and Ring 2011). With the change came an expectation from governments that tertiary institutions develop students' employability (CARICOM Secretariat 2020). Students hold the same expectation of their institutions. Students view higher education as an avenue for preparing themselves for future careers (Maynard and Ring 2011). In particular, many students are interested in using their education to improve their financial position as tertiary education may provide access to better-paying jobs (Youssef 2016). Higher education institutions have embraced this expectation to develop students' employability (Blair 2012).

Caribbean higher education institutions have sought to bolster their employability efforts through curricular review (Blair 2012). Some universities have engaged employers to match their academic curricula to industry needs so that students receive knowledge that employers find valuable (Insanally 2018). Universities also align their degrees with sustainable development goals to prepare students for industries that their governments prioritise for growth (Gift 2018) For example The University of the West Indies has implemented courses about digitising governance systems and eco-tourism (Gift 2018). Universities have also sought to increase internship opportunities for students (Insanally 2018). Students' application of their knowledge helps them understand the nuances of theories and knowledge and learn how to use them in varied conditions (Morrison, Ramsay, and Heath 2013). At the University of Trinidad and Tobago engineering students participate in internships to see how equipment functions within a plant or factory (Insanally 2018; University of Trinidad and Tobago, n.d.) Seeing knowledge applied in a real-world setting creates a greater understanding of the concepts discussed in the classroom (Strachan 2016). However, the competencies students need to develop during their university education extend beyond academic knowledge to include soft skills such as interpersonal skills and leadership ability

(Strachan 2016). Developing such skills and abilities is not bound to the classroom (Paterson and Hutchinson 2019). Student services units bear the responsibility of implementing programmes to help students develop the soft skills necessary for improving students' employability (Reynolds 2005, 2007).

Promoting Academic Success

As Caribbean higher education institutions have broadened access, they face the challenge of educating students with limited financial resources to fund their education. Students' limited financial resources can hinder their academic success (Henry, Nelson, and Aarons 2020). Although some students receive some financial support through grants, scholarships, and government aid, the growing cost of living may still pose challenges for students as they seek to fund their living and educational expenses (Henry, Nelson, and Aarons 2020). Students' financial challenges can pose a barrier to academic success because concerns about financial resources can be a source of stress for students (Maynard and Ring 2011). As students direct cognitive and emotional resources to thinking about their financial challenges, it decreases their capacity to address other situations in their life (Northern, O'Brien, and Goetz 2010). This distraction can lead to disengagement from academics and a reduced capacity to cope with academic stress (Northern, O'Brien, and Goetz 2010). The increased access to higher education in the Caribbean has created a need for tertiary institutions to provide support as students face financial challenges (Henry, Nelson, and Aarons 2020). Supporting students as they manage their financial stress maximises an institution's effectiveness in fostering academic success.

Additionally, students face a multitude of stressors. For some students, higher education serves as a means for social mobility, bringing financial success (Youssef 2016; Maynard and Ring 2011). Although some students use the potential of future success as a motivation in their college experiences, for others, their fears about their future financial position can also be a source of stress (Rasul 2020; Youssef 2016; Maharaj, Blair, and Chin Yuen Kee 2018). Finances are not the only source of stress negatively impacting students' academic performance. The demands of the academic course load are also a source of stress for students (Da Silva 2016; Persaud and Persaud 2016). The amount of work, communication with lecturers, and completing group assignments make students feel stressed about their academic load (Persaud and Persaud 2016; Nayak and Sahu 2021).

When students do not have the tools to manage their stress, their stress can cause deterioration of their mental health (Sawatzky et al. 2012). Studies about the mental health of university students in the Caribbean report that most students experience moderate or high levels of anxiety and depression (Henry 2020; Nayak and Sahu 2021; Lowe, Lipps, and Young 2009). Students' poor mental health can negatively impact their academic success through loss of motivation, decreased concentration, and decreased energy levels (Ashby-Mitchell and Henry 2020). Also, poor mental health may cause students to view their abilities negatively, which has been shown to negatively impact their academic performance (Alipio 2020). In the Caribbean, students with low confidence levels also show signs of burnout, depression, and anxiety, which can negatively impact their academic performance (Youssef 2016; Nayak and Sahu 2021).

Students have found success in using various relaxation techniques to mitigate the impact of their stress on their mental health, and they also seek support outside of themselves (Youssef 2016). When students feel stressed, they may seek assistance from other individuals. Students with access to social support have lower levels of depression and burnout (Esnard and Mohammed 2014; Youssef 2016). Although researchers point to clinical counselling as one means of improving students' mental health in the Caribbean, with students' reluctance to use clinical counselling and the limited availability of counselling services in relation to the number of students with poor mental health, institutions must find alternative ways to support students' mental health (Greenidge and Daire 2010; Lowe, Lipps, and Young 2009). The findings from this study show that student services practitioners intentionally act to support students within the context described in this literature review.

Findings

With intentional effort, practitioners shape how their institutions impact students. This section discusses three ways holistic development shapes practitioners' contributions to their institution's mission. First, their operationalisation of holistic development leads them to develop all aspects of students' lives because each element of a student's life holds value and needs attention from their university. Their interest in developing each dimension of students' lives and enhancing students' employability are mutually shaping one another. Practitioners identify skills students need to succeed in future employment and teach students those

skills. Second, practitioners also believe that the dimensions of students' lives are interconnected, meaning each aspect of a student's life influences another part of their life. This operationalisation of holistic development influences their work supporting students' academic success. To influence students' academic success, practitioners work to support students' basic needs, assist with stress management, and motivate them. Third, a holistic development philosophy also leads them to advocate for specific students to access resources to improve the non-academic aspects of their lives. Practitioners also operationalise their holistic development philosophy by advocating for policies to make their institutions more student-centred.

Employability: Holistic development to foster students' employability

Practitioners intentionally direct their holistic development efforts towards the goal of developing students' employability. Practitioners situate their work in their university's mission of helping students develop skills and characteristics to become employees that organisations would like to hire after graduation. For example, when Claudia described how she uses holistic development, she positions it as necessary because of its impact on students' employability. She shared, "We want them to have those core values that will make them marketable not only in the Caribbean, but worldwide, and become the employee of choice. Therefore, those core values of excellence, respect, reliability and all of those things that would make an individual a rounded individual." For Claudia, holistic development is a means to achieve employability. Her work with holistic development aims to develop the skills necessary for someone to be desired by employers.

Holistic development is not an end; rather, it is a means to accomplish the goal of employability. Practitioners' understanding of employability determines the skills and characteristics important to holistic development. Practitioners discussed teaching skills to students or developing characteristics that would be helpful for students in their future jobs. For example, Ingrid identified that interpersonal skills are a facet of holistic development which would serve students in their future goals. Ingrid noted that her work of teaching a student how to advocate for themselves is necessary because advocacy skills will help the student in a future job. She said, "So, it's also guiding them not only through this situation, also showing them how you ask for help. How you negotiate help. Because you may have issues, and in life, even if you're in an office and you have

an assignment, how do you negotiate with a colleague to assist you with getting through?” Although her work has an immediate impact of helping the student solve a current problem, her goal is to help students use the skills in other aspects of their lives. She shared that teaching students how to ask for help is a skill they will use in a future job.

Additionally, practitioners’ work with developing students’ ability to work across differences prepares students for the workforce. André shared that diversity workshops were important because they prepared students for the workforce. When he described these workshops, he stated, “We spoke to professionalism and conduct in the world of work, how culture will play a significant role in that, on how to navigate, how to be respectful to people’s culture.” Similar to Ingrid’s integration of employability and holistic development, André used holistic development to achieve employability. Although André referenced an aspect of holistic development – helping students interact across differences – holistic development is not his goal. For André, he makes an effort to develop students’ interpersonal skills to prepare students for their careers.

Similarly, as Shelly chooses to help student leaders develop non-academic skills, she identifies skills students would need in their future worklife. For example, she discussed teaching students about email etiquette because she believes students will need to follow certain norms in their future careers.

I’m seeing that persons would send me an email with just an attachment. There’s nothing to say what I should do with the attachment. Those I use as teachable moments to say, if you’re going into the working world, you can’t be doing that. I need to have a subject line. You need to greet the person. Put in it what it is you want, and close. So those little moments, I use as teachable moments.

Shelly uses her interactions with students as an opportunity to develop students’ professionalism. Student services practitioners’ efforts to support students’ holistic development contribute to students’ employability. As practitioners seek to nurture the non-academic aspects of students’ lives, they develop the skills and characteristics students will need in future jobs.

Holistic development’s contribution to academic success

Practitioners’ holistic development included a belief that the dimensions of students’ lives are interconnected. They believe that their work with helping students in one aspect of their lives would impact another part of a student’s life. This

belief shaped how they intentionally took steps to support academic success. Practitioners sought to improve students' well-being as a way to foster students' academic success. There are three primary areas of well-being that practitioners attend to: (a) the impact of lack of financial resources, (b) managing stress, and (c) building self-confidence.

Practitioners discussed that they work to support students' well-being to positively impact students' academic retention and success. Stacy noted that various non-academic aspects of a student's life could prevent them from returning for the following semester. For Stacy, student services practitioners bear a responsibility to assist students with the non-academic aspects of students because of the impact it has on academic retention. In addition, supporting students' well-being is a necessary function of the institution. Her discussion of the importance of her actions to the institution's goals demonstrates the intentionality of practitioners in supporting students' well-being. She shared:

For us, we feel very badly when we know we have a very brilliant student, let's say in medical sciences, but in his or her third year, she or he is unable to continue because of a financial concern or because of a mental health or emotional concern. So, student services has a role. And that's where the academic aspect and the student support aspect must marry, if we are to produce what the university calls, the distinctive graduates, how are we going to get that distinctive graduate?

Practitioners assist students in the non-academic areas of their lives with the intention to contribute to students' academic retention. They use their holistic development philosophy to support these intentions.

Practitioners also shared the intentions of their work by discussing how they define success. Practitioners use students' academic success as an indicator of success in helping students with personal and situational stressors. As practitioners work with students who face an immediate challenge, practitioners aim to help students complete one semester and return for another semester and seek to positively impact students' grades. When Kerry Ann offered an example of a moment of success, she described that her efforts to support a student through a crisis situation were successful because they contributed to a student's academic performance. She shared:

Another situation I had where a student was going through a serious crisis very, very serious crisis. And she said she's just like, 'You know, I think I just want to withdraw.' And I was like, 'That is not even an option.' And she was able to get a

GPA of 3.5 or something like that. And I said this is the same student. So I said, ‘This is the same person who [said] ‘I’m not coming back’, and she says, ‘You know I’m really, really thankful that you pushed me to stay’ because she was ready, ready, fully ready to give up, and I just told her: it’s the little wins that you have.

Kerry Ann believed that since the student did not want to continue her enrolment in school, the student’s GPA was an accomplishment. Kerry Ann used the student’s GPA to indicate her success as a practitioner. When helping students manage their stress, student services practitioners seek to reduce its negative impact on their academic pursuits.

Further, Ingrid explained that assisting students with personal concerns and crises is essential for fostering academic success. Before she can help students develop academic skills, Ingrid addresses other dimensions of a student’s life which are impacting their academic performance. She shared, “Sometimes, a student comes for academic support. But when I start talking to that student, they have another need, financial, for example, which will impact. So, I could talk all the nice things about skills or whatever, but they’re hungry. They’re not sure where the next dollar will come from.” Since the various aspects of students’ lives are interconnected, to help students become academically successful, practitioners address other areas impacting students’ academics, such as financial need.

Practitioners’ concern for students’ well-being requires caring for students’ mental health. A student services practitioner’s role includes helping students with personal and situational stressors. Practitioners may help by providing a space for students to talk about their stress. Practitioners also help students mitigate the impact of stress on students’ confidence and motivation. In a focus group discussion, participants described providing basic counselling and motivating students to continue completing their degrees. Some comments were:

Kerry Ann: Just to be that motivation because I have students who just say, ‘Okay, Ms. I’m done, I’m not doing it’, and I go ‘No, you can’t really do that right now, you reached this far’. I say it’s a holistic role, the term of student services, it’s a holistic role. It doesn’t operate in silos; it is a very encompassing area.

Judith: Exactly, and you shared this morning that your counselling unit is overwhelmed with persons and so is ours, overwhelming, so if you can give that support especially where personal issues are concerned, family issues, near exam time, and all of that then you have to have a listening ear in order to assist them.

These two participants constructed meaning about their responsibility to care

for students' well-being. For Kerry Ann, caring for students' well-being included motivating students to continue their academic pursuits. Judith spent time listening to students' minor personal stressors to provide stress relief during the exam period. Both Judith and Kerry Ann help students mitigate the impact of their stress on their academic performance.

Advocacy for individual students

When practitioners identify that students' life circumstances may hinder their academic success, they help students find solutions to the problem. In these situations, they target their advocacy towards addressing students' specific obstacles. When advocating to other individuals, they sought actions that better suit the students' circumstances. For example, in the focus group, Keisha shared her experience of advocating for a lecturer to be more accommodating in working with a sick student. For Keisha, advocating on behalf of a student is central to her work. Her colleagues in the focus group indicated their agreement with her perspective. Keisha shared:

We also go through team-building training because even though we may not be faculty, we have to have a relationship with them. Because sometimes a student might be having some sort of crisis, you may have to go to lobby on that student's behalf [group agrees] to say, you know 'This student wasn't feeling well. Can you give that student a quiz or a makeup quiz?' because a lecturer might start hard and fast [group agrees] 'That's it', and you say, 'Well, you know the student wasn't feeling well, not to the point where the student had to go to get a sick certificate, but he's just not feeling well.' So sometimes you have to go and lobby on behalf of the student with the lecturer, and if you have a good relationship with them, they work with you. [Group agrees]

Keisha assisted a student by advocating on behalf of a student to a lecturer. Knowing that the student's physical well-being impacted the students' ability to participate in an academic assessment, Keisha sought an alternative practice that would better suit the student's circumstances.

Claudia provided an example of advocating for a student to get the resources she needed to succeed. Claudia used her network to find a job for a student facing financial difficulties. In discussing the student's circumstances, Claudia shared, "She wasn't getting enough financial support anymore. And you know, I encourage her; tell her 'hang in there'. We found options for her. We helped her to get a

job.” Practitioners understand that students have various needs that will impact their ability to succeed academically. Practitioners advocate to assist students with finding a solution to an obstacle that may be unique to them.

Advocacy at the institutional level

Practitioners perceive that their institutions value student-centredness and see themselves as responsible for engaging others to enact the universities’ commitment to being student-centred. Practitioners use their knowledge of holistic development to advocate for changes at their institutions. Since practitioners understand students’ needs beyond the classroom and how those needs impact their classroom experiences, practitioners are uniquely positioned to help their institutions become student-centred. André discussed this perspective when he shared, “What we really hope is that student services practitioners are always at the table so we can guide, certainly we can give insight as to how programmes will help students. We see the students intimately. And so they would express certain things to us that we can really use to guide how our university puts things in place to better serve them.” He said he makes the institution more student-centred by offering suggestions for new practices or revisions to existing practices, which would address students’ needs. Although student-centredness is central to the institution’s mission, practitioners advocated for aligning institutional actions with their universities’ goal of being student-centred. Practitioners advocate as an intentional effort to influence how the institution functions, with the goal of making the institution more student-centred.

Practitioners may also advocate for material resources to meet students’ needs. Ingrid advocated for an accessible van because this was a resource that would help students with disabilities get to their classes. She shared:

So, in one instance, I have been advocating for an accessible vehicle for students with disabilities. What it meant is that you have to continue to do proposals, negotiate, go to the principal, go to the deputy principal, just to get something like that. From 2012 to 2018, I actually got them to think, ‘Yes. This is something important. We will find the funds to allocate.’ She knows what she’s speaking about, and therefore it was purchased.

For Ingrid, her role includes advocating for resources for students. To make the institution student-centred, Ingrid demonstrated a need for students and convinced the appropriate individuals to purchase the resource. Ingrid demonstrates

intentionality in seeking to align institutional practices with an institutional value, student-centredness.

Discussion

Using institutional work as a framework to interpret the findings, this study demonstrates that student services practitioners shape higher education institutions' impact on students (Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2011). Practitioners use holistic development with the intent to sustain values which are important to their institutions: developing students' employability, fostering academic success, and being a student-centred institution. Their advocacy to make the institution student-centred also demonstrates their agency within their institutions as practitioners sought to implement new practices and policies. Institutional work is an intentional effort to shape the institution (Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2011). The findings from the study provide several ways that practitioners operationalise holistic development into specific steps aimed at achieving the aforementioned goals.

Previous research about how holistic development is operationalised within the Caribbean has pointed towards the goal of employability (Reynolds 2005, 2007). The findings from this study align with existing perspectives that students should learn soft skills to improve their employability. Whereas previous theorisations have emphasised programmes as an avenue for development (Reynolds 2005, 2007), these findings show that student services practitioners also use their interactions with students to accomplish this goal. The findings in this study highlight the importance of individual staff members in providing support to students, particularly in the area of crisis and stress management. I propose using a case management model as a way to formalise personalised interventions that practitioners offer in their interactions with students. Other researchers have noted that universities can mitigate the impact of students' stress on their academic success by providing personalised interventions to address a student's specific source of stress (Ashby-Mitchell and Henry 2020).

A case management model for supporting students

A case management model differs from standard service models in that the case manager shares responsibility with the student for resolving the problem

(Adams, Hazelwood, and Hayden 2014). A case manager assesses the student's needs, identifies resources that can assist the student, speaks to individuals on behalf of the student, and maintains communication with the student until the situation is resolved (Adams, Hazelwood, and Hayden 2014). While the ultimate goal is to empower students to act as their own advocates, students may not initially have the network necessary to navigate bureaucratic processes (Adams, Hazelwood, and Hayden 2014). However, case managers can use their network to secure a solution on behalf of the student (Adams, Hazelwood, and Hayden 2014). In addition to mitigating the impact of stress on students' academics, a case management model could impact students' perception of customer service at their university. Compared with other expectations students have of their institutions, an institution's ability to provide a personalised solution to students' concerns can significantly impact students' perception of customer service (Murray 2018). Case managers can be a path for delivering the personalised solutions students need when their circumstances create stress.

This study reveals student services practitioners provide personalised solutions to students. Although the role of student services practitioners is impactful for students, only a limited number of students interact with student services practitioners (Niehaus, Williams, Zobac, et al. 2019). However, other staff members may encounter students who appear to be experiencing stress due to managing a challenging situation. Instead of referring students to one or multiple offices for assistance, students can be referred to a case manager. Case managers could be located in units where students facing stress visit, such as a counselling unit or a bursary centre. Student services practitioners can also receive training on how to follow a case management model to improve their service delivery.

The case management model consists of three stages. During the first stage, practitioners seek to understand the students' situation by determining how it is impacting their life and what would be an appropriate resolution for the student's situation (Adams, Hazelwood, and Hayden 2014). During the second stage, the practitioner engages in advocacy, while empowering the student. A practitioner would contact individuals at the institution who can assist the student, make requests for assistance on behalf of the student, and follow up to ensure that the student receives the assistance (Adams, Hazelwood, and Hayden 2014). During this stage, a practitioner takes responsibility for the solution, which requires confirming the student has received a solution. For example, a practitioner may accompany a student to a meeting to ensure the student attends the meeting,

or verify that other units have followed through with providing assistance to a student (Adams, Hazelwood, and Hayden 2014). Although the practitioner is responsible for the solution, the practitioner should teach the student how to find a solution independently (Adams, Hazelwood, and Hayden 2014). For example, a practitioner may coach the student on how to advocate for themselves. Finally, after the practitioner finds a resolution to the student's situation, the practitioner should follow up with the student to ensure that the resolution continues to meet the student's needs (Adams, Hazelwood, and Hayden 2014).

Training student services practitioners

Previous research indicates that student services provide programmes to help students' holistic development (Close 2010; Reynolds 2007). The findings from this study add to the existing research by demonstrating that practitioners use their holistic development philosophy in conjunction with their understanding of employability and their knowledge about obstacles students face in pursuing academic success. Since practitioners' understanding of employability and academic success informs their actions, their professional development should continue to improve their understanding of employability and potential obstacles to academic success.

This study also shows that advocacy is essential to the student services practitioner's role. To support students' academic success, practitioners must develop their social networks at their institutions. Additionally, student services practitioners' training and professional development should help them understand their institutional culture to identify advocacy strategies appropriate for their institutional environment.

Scope of the Study and Future Research

The scope of the study is a response to the decolonising methodology critique of positivist approaches to research: all research is partial and incomplete (Patel 2016). As an alternative to limitations, the scope of study offers insight into how the research design may have yielded particular findings and provides insight into different methods that a researcher may use to further understand the concepts in question. With the lack of research about Caribbean student services

practice, this study was designed to be exploratory to allow participants to define the important aspects of their work.

This study showed that practitioners contribute to students' employability through developing students' communication skills, understanding of social norms, and interpersonal skills. However, there are other attributes relevant to students' employability. Specifically, university graduates' cognitive development positions graduates to problem-solve and continue to learn new concepts (Strachan 2016). This study's exploratory nature did not yield any insight into practitioners' actions to support students' cognitive development. Similarly, a qualitative study about students' development did not produce findings about cognitive development, but in another study, when students were asked directly about their cognitive development, researchers found evidence of cognitive development (Niehaus, Williams, Person, et al. 2019; Paterson and Hutchinson 2019). Future qualitative research should use interview questions specifically asking about cognitive development to identify mechanisms practitioners use to contribute to students' cognitive development.

In this study, I asked participants about the nature of their work, their success in supporting students, and how they achieved that success. Researchers could further explore practitioners' advocacy by exploring both practitioners' challenges and success. Exploring the challenges may provide insight into effective advocacy strategies which student services practitioners can use to support students.

Conclusion

I sought to answer the research question: "How do student services practitioners use their understanding of holistic development to serve the purposes of higher education in the Caribbean?" Student services practitioners use their holistic approach to contribute to students' employability and academic success. They also engage in advocacy to make their institutions student-centred. Institutions can adopt a case management system to support students encountering obstacles in their academic journey. Previous research points to the importance of student service practitioners having a holistic approach to working with students (Close 2010; Reynolds 2007; 2005). This study highlights that student services practitioners should also have knowledge about employability and advocacy skills.

Notes

1. In decolonising research, the use of the first-person language is an intentional deviation from the positivist method-centric third person language which hides the role of the researcher in producing the research (Webb 1992).
2. Student affairs and student services are interchangeable terms that refer to the same type of work at higher education institutions. Some literature about Caribbean higher education uses the term 'student services', whereas in the US literature 'student affairs' is a more common term.

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