

# Non-Academic Factors Affecting the Academic Success of Grenadian Students at St. George's University (SGU)

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## INTRODUCTION

Ensuring success for indigenous people at tertiary institutions promises to be one of the key educational issues of the new millennium. It is a global problem that occurs in Africa, Latin America and in much of Asia and North America. Specific to this study is the problem in the Caribbean with particular reference to Grenada. As increasing numbers of Grenadian students enter an international university such as St. George's University in a developing country like Grenada, the relatively low rate of success and persistence of Grenadian students becomes more apparent. When Grenadian students enter the St. George's University School of Medicine and Pre-Medical Program, they are exposed, many for the first time, to a multi-cultural institution. As a result of their educational background and cultural factors that are unique to Grenadians, these students encounter problems not pertinent to other students at the University. The study set as its objective, an inquiry into the non-cognitive factors which frustrate the aspirations of the native population of Grenada as they seek tertiary educational opportunities at St. George's University through the School of Medicine and Pre-Medical Program.

## 2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The study will seek to identify and analyse the unique non-cognitive factors that are related to the successful academic performance of Grenadian students who matriculate into medical programs of St. George's University. Data will be obtained by making use of quantitative research through a proven questionnaire and proceeding with a predominantly qualitative analysis through the method of grounded theory.

## 3. SITE

Grenada was discovered by Columbus in 1498, during his third voyage and was originally named Conception (Payne, Sutton and Thorndike, 1984:1). Grenada the country is comprised of three main islands: Grenada, Carriacou and Petit Martinique (Schoenhals and Melanson, 1985:1). It is believed that the Spanish renamed it to their city of Granada (Glass, 1985:1). The majority, approximately 85 percent of the people, are of African descent and the main religions are Roman Catholic and Anglican. The official language is English (Glass, 1985:1; Cosentino, 1994:3).

St. George's University, a multicultural institution, plays an important role in Grenada, as well as in the Caribbean, and influences the local economy, health and education of Grenada. St. George's University School of Medicine was created by an act of Parliament on behalf of the Government of Grenada in 1976 (Graves, 1998:8) as an institution for higher education. On January 17, 1977 the first class of St. George's University School of Medicine arrived in Grenada by charter plane (SGU, 1998a:1). More than 3000 students have been awarded the MD degree from St. George's University School of Medicine and graduates have practiced in more that 22 countries across the world (SGU, 1998b:2). There are more than 80 countries represented on the campus with the majority of students coming from the United States. There are approximately 210 students enrolled each term in the School of Medicine and approximately 40 in the Pre-Medical Program. Traditionally, due to limited scholarships, only a few are Grenadians.

## 4. POPULATION

Twenty-five Grenadian students were enrolled in either the Pre-Medical Program or the Medical Program at St. George's University during the period in which the study was conducted and all agreed to participate in the study. Students are accepted to St. George's University based on their academic performance in their respective secondary schools, as well as in the Pre-Medical Program. All were considered to be among Grenada's top students

and were already viewed as somewhat successful simply because they had been accepted into the Pre-Medical and Medical Programs. These were fourteen females and eleven males and the majority of the Grenadian students were between the ages of 20-25. The average age of the students was 24. Of the twenty-five students participating in the study only six have lived in a country outside of the Caribbean. Interacting, studying and living with other cultural groups were new experiences for the nineteen students who had never lived outside the Caribbean.

## 5. TYPE OF RESEARCH

This research was based on the principle of grounded theory as an example of qualitative research. In this kind of research, the researcher is committed to gaining comprehensive data and inner perspectives of the population being researched. Grounded theory was originally presented and developed by two sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (Glaser, 1992:16; Glaser and Strauss, 1967:1). Grounded theory may be defined as:

a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analysed. Theory evolves during actual research and it does this through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection (Strauss and Corbin, 1994:273).

## 6. DATA COLLECTION STRATEGIES

The primary data collection was based upon the "*Supplementary Admissions Questionnaire*," a questionnaire developed by Dr. William Sedlacek, as well as on individual interviews (Tracey and Sedlacek, 1984:346). The questionnaire was given to all the students participating in the study. It was used as a guide for the interviews so as to determine the non-cognitive factors that affect the success and retention of students. The questionnaire was augmented, through the researcher, by several open-ended questions designed to elicit information specific to non-cognitive factors relevant to Grenadian students. In the analysis and reporting of the data, the confidentiality of the participants was protected. Numbers only known to the researcher were used instead of names (Borg and Gall, 1983:112). Assurance of confidentiality was also given to participants through the letter of consent. It is imperative to gain consent from the participants and to ensure them of the privacy of the interview (Fontana and Frey, 1994:372). All the interviews were tape recorded, as this method is still the most common and reliable way of recording interviews (Kvale, 1996:160). All the interviews were transcribed. This was essential, as transcriptions are necessary for validity, accurate analysis and clarification of interview data (Mishler, 1993:50).

## 7. RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the data analysis, it may be concluded that non-cognitive factors do relate to the academic success and retention of Grenadian students in the Medical Programs of a multicultural institution such as St. George's University.

### 7.1 Finances

From the data analysis it is apparent that finances have a significant effect on the performance of students in the university. Grenadian students are predominantly supported by means of a scholarship. This scholarship covers the basic costs; It covers tuition and partially covers accommodation costs, but does not provide a stipend for daily living expenses. Financial problems lead to stress and anxiety for all students. Not being adequately supported financially has a negative impact on some students' academic performance. It would therefore be beneficial to rather reduce the number of scholarships and provide the successful applicants with additional financial support in the form of a stipend to address their daily needs.

The scholarship program needs to be transparent. Students should be fully aware of the procedures, policies and rules of the scholarship program. It must be a fair process, free from political interference and abiding to the criteria for awarding the scholarship. Every effort should be made to ensure that financial implications do not prevent Grenadian students, who have the ability and motivation to succeed at the university, the opportunity from doing so.

### 7.2 Housing and transportation

Due to financial constraints, many students do not have sufficient funds to afford adequate housing and to live where they want to. Grenadian students who do not receive scholarships do not have adequate finances to live on

campus. The Grenadian scholarship students are allocated specific housing on Grand Anse, usually three fellow Grenadian students to a room. The housing of students within the Medical Programs should be improved. There must be fewer students to a room. Once the housing of the Grenadian medical students improves, then their focus will be more directed towards studies and less on distressing themselves about a place to live. If affordable on-campus housing is offered to Grenadian students that study in the Medical Programs, it will increase their study time and provide more opportunity to interact with peers, as they will spend less time travelling to and from campus. These Grenadian students that live off campus spend a lot of time travelling between home and the university. Transportation time takes study time away from students. Due to the inconsistency of buses, the poor road conditions and distances to travel between school and home, unnecessary stress is created. Affordable housing on campus for these Grenadian students would alleviate this problem.

### **7.3 Cultural**

Grenadian students within the Medical Program at St. George's University feel isolated within the large student body, which consists mostly of American students. Little interaction occurs between these Grenadian students and the other cultural groups. The Grenadian students do not study with Americans and they generally do not visit, eat or party together. They do not have a Grenadian organization nor do they ever address the larger student body or have a faculty member representing them. Cultural differences, which may affect academic success, occur amongst students at most universities. St. George's University is no exception. From the first day of registration, Grenadian medical students should be placed into a buddy system. There should be a cultural organization for the Grenadian students and in this case, for the Grenadian students enrolled in the Medical Program. Such an organization would provide the students with the opportunity to meet with other students from their own culture, but it will also provide them with a chance to voice their concerns through the organization to other students. There should be a specific faculty member appointed as representative for the Grenadian medical students. Such a representative could interact between the Grenadian students and other students, faculty, staff and administration. In addition, all Grenadian students should have a faculty academic advisor to assist them academically at the university. The university administration should acknowledge the Grenadian students more within the university and student body. This could be done by asking a Grenadian to address the first term students during the first orientation address to all students. The Grenadian medical students could also address the local community about the university on television, which could establish a sense of loyalty in the community towards Grenadian students of St. George's University. Few Grenadian medical students interact with other medical students in an academic setting. At present, Grenadian students tend to form review groups with fellow Grenadian students and not with other cultural groups. It would be helpful to divide these students into different group review sessions consisting of students from different cultural groups. Asking these Grenadian students to tutor or facilitate these sessions would build their confidence and assist them in getting to know and learn from other cultural groupings.

### **7.4 Emotional Support**

The Grenadian students interviewed have strong support persons in their daily lives. They depend on these persons for financial, emotional and academic support. These support persons are normally friends and family members, mostly fathers and mothers. Some also rely on religion as a form of support. When the interviewed students need encouragement, help or assistance, they approach their support person. The faculty are also seen as people that support the Grenadian medical students when they are in need, but some of the students interviewed felt that family members are more genuine in their support than faculty. When the Grenadian students enter the medical programs, they are often removed from their support persons and they encounter different kinds of problems related to being away from home or studying at a multicultural institution. Therefore, they need a support person to relate their concerns to. This need on the part of the Grenadian students should be addressed by St. George's University. It is recommended that all Grenadian medical students should have access to a strong support person. Whether it is a family member, friend, faculty member or God, the University should determine whether such a support person exists for each Grenadian student and if not, how such a demand can be met. This could be one of the functions of a faculty advisor of the Grenadian students.

### **7.5 Personality of Students**

The Grenadian students' personal characteristics can influence their academic well-being positively or negatively. Students with a positive attitude are more motivated and successful than less dedicated students. Grenadian medical students are generally well motivated, dedicated and hardworking. Some stay cheerful under pressure, while others become fearful, but regardless, many use these feelings as motivation. It is significant to note that there are more female Grenadian medical students than male. The Grenadian students felt that the female Grenadian students were more motivated, disciplined and focussed than male Grenadian students. The more positive attitudes of female students towards their studies may be a reason why there are fourteen female and

eleven male Grenadian students and why female students are doing better than the male students in the Pre-Medical Program and in the medical school. The Grenadian medical students see extracurricular activities as an opportunity to release stress and tension. Although most of the Grenadian medical students' time is occupied by studying, it would be beneficial to organize and implement more extra-curricular and group activities. Students could use such activities to interact with other students and to release tension.

## 8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Whatever changes a university makes, it should always remain a centre of excellence, producing qualified students, staffed by quality administrators and academics (Dlamini, 1995:45). It is important that higher education institutions examine their policies regarding international minority students.

There is world-wide pressure on universities to ensure more access and mobility to enhance effectiveness, ... both public and private institutions are being held much more accountable than ever before (Havenga, 1998:1).

The theory that emerged in this study indicates that non-cognitive factors are related to the successful academic performance of indigenous Grenadian medical students who matriculate into a multicultural institution, such as St. George's University. It is significant to note that many difficulties faced by Grenadian students may also be found in the experiences of other culture groups, as they enter university and face new challenges. The non-cognitive questionnaire applied in this study is a good example to use "for designing proactive interventions" so as to increase student success (Boyer & Sedlacek, 1988:222). A proactive approach would include the training of faculty and staff with regards to non-cognitive factors, along with the development of a non-cognitive student profile with an assigned program for each student (Sedlacek, 1983:37). Universities should also "continue to address prejudice and biases which may limit the ideals of democracy" (Fish, 1997:109). It is only when university policies are adjusted according to the changes that occur within the university, that student problems will diminish, providing the students with the opportunity to become more successful (Agar, 1990:454).

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