

ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF THE NEW STUDENTS: UNIVERSITY LIFE TRANSITION AT PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT – *As the institution welcomes its new students, it is important that the institution addresses their needs as part of their university life transition in adapting to the new normal. Hence, this study determined the profile, flexible learning program (FLP) implementation, and student services assistance needs. The data were collected through a survey using a Google form participated by 4,591 from the incoming first year, senior high school, and transferee students for the Academic Year 2021 – 2022 during the Week of Welcome. It employed quantitative analysis using descriptive statistical tools. Findings revealed the following: (1) students needed mobile load assistance to access the internet, and the majority were only using android smartphones with slow internet connectivity; and (2) student services highlighted emotional and psychological living conditions revealing several of them needed help to manage the challenges faced at this time of the pandemic. Therefore, it is recommended that the university continues to allocate funds addressing the needs of the new students to assist them in their academic access and success.*

Keywords: Student services, pandemic, flexible learning program, mental health, and students' support

1. INTRODUCTION

With the onset of the pandemic, higher education institutions (HEIs) have shifted to open distance learning (ODL) with synchronous and asynchronous modalities [1]. It has also changed the delivery of student services through the Office of Student Affairs. Therefore, "it is not indeed business as usual" because universities needed to adapt to the new normal. CMO No. 8, series of 2021, also known as the "Guidelines on the implementation of Flexible Delivery of Student Affairs and Services (SAS) Programs during the COVID-19 Pandemic," stipulated that "CHED aims to pursue the delivery of SAS programs during the pandemic... focusing on catering to the mental health of students through various modes/options most appropriate to them" [2]. Hence, this study determined the new students' profile, flexible learning program (FLP) implementation needs, and student services assistance that the university could provide at these trying times. It gathered data through a survey using the Google form participated by 4,591 from the incoming first year, senior high school, and transferee students for the Academic Year 2021 – 2022 during the Week of Welcome (WoW). This WoW is conducted annually, welcoming the students and orienting them with the academic and non-academic policies as part of their smooth transition to university life. The main objective of this study was to address the needs of the new students that could be channeled through the Office of Student Affairs (OSA). With this, it would provide research-based assistance to the students, promote good mental health and emotional well-being, and ensure academic success in the university.

This study was anchored on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which has changed through time because of the pandemic [3]. In 1943, Abraham Maslow first introduced his study on "A Theory of Human Motivation." His concept could be applied as a guide to provide student support and intervention in the COVID-19 crisis and future threats. "Students are dealing with a variety of social-emotional issues related to the pandemic from a lack of basic resources in the home such as food, a deficit in coping skills, or even a lack of internet access" [4]. Relative to this study, it has led students to become working students to make ends meet. Their coping skills and mechanisms in the flexible learning program, from blended learning to online or remote learning, have also been challenged. More

importantly, the slow and intermittent internet connectivity contributed to their fear of academic success and availing of student services.

The delivery of student services has indeed affected how to deliver services and aid these students with limited mobility and resources. The country's Inter-agency Task Force (IATF) guidelines and health protocols were stringent to ensure the safety of its people. On the other hand, it developed students' resiliency to face different adversities exemplifying one of the graduate attributes of the university. Suh et al. [5] added that these "shifts in human needs can inform policies and recovery efforts for current and anticipated needs." HEIs need to find strategies for institutional policies and challenges also to become resilient in the changing educational landscapes.

Vermote et al. [6] also stated that from "Maslow's Hierarchical Need Theory and Self-Determination Theory, the unique role of felt insecurity and the psychological needs, as well as their dynamic interplay, in the prediction of mental health." It has contributed to how students felt insecure and how to learn during this pandemic. For this purpose, the study would like to obtain data on the student's current situation and how they could assist them in their needs.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research design employed in this study was quantitative analysis using descriptive statistical tools. It would like to determine the respondents' current situation as they experienced the transition to university life. In this light, the university has research-based data in identifying students' needs, particularly in the FLP implementation and the delivery of student services to maintain their good mental health and emotional well-being.

This study was conducted at the University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines – Cagayan de Oro during the Week of Welcome or new students' orientation on academic and non-academic policies for the First Semester of SY 2021-2022 as part of the registration process of this event. The 4,591 respondents who actively participated in the study were the new bona fide first year, senior high school, and transferee students who responded to the survey.

In the annual Week of Welcome (WoW), new students were strongly encouraged to attend this event to get to

know USTP, its vision, mission, and academic and non-academic policies, among others. If they missed the event, they could watch the live stream on the official WoW pages. Furthermore, it considered the informed consent and data privacy provisions in conducting the online survey.

The research instrument included: (1) FLP concerns - internet accessibility, daily spending on the internet for educational purposes, gadgets owned; and (2) student services, particularly on mental health and emotional well-being.

The statistical treatment employed in this study was a percentage to describe the current conditions of the new students that would be crucial in providing FLP assistance and the delivery of student services.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study would like to determine and address the needs of the new students in the FLP implementation and student services through the Office of Student Affairs (OSA).

Table 1 presents the flexible learning program (FLP) implementation needs. It included Internet connectivity, daily spending for the use of the internet for educational purposes, and gadgets owned. These would be instrumental in accessing the USTeP (University of Science and Technology e-Portal) as the university's official learning management system (LMS). However, knowing the status of the internet infrastructure of the Philippines, particularly in the hinterlands, students would potentially face challenges in getting a good signal. Otherwise, they needed to find places for internet accessibility and connectivity that might be potentially harmful to the students with the threat of COVID-19.

It has been shown in the data that the majority have internet connectivity. However, many also of the students did not have internet accessibility, which made students find other means to connect. It could also be observed that this was consistent with their responses wherein they needed internet café, Wi-fi, peso net, and others to have connectivity. In addition, the majority were dependent on mobile data. It could mean that some applications would require higher bandwidth and specifications to access some educational tools or materials (e.g., laboratory equivalent applications, simulations, etc.). In addition, the majority needed at least Php 50.00 for their daily internet spending, which could be challenging for the students because of the limited financial resources caused by the pandemic. Ruengorn et al. [7] cited job loss, income loss, and economic burden with adverse mental health outcomes during this pandemic. It has affected the economy globally. As a state university, government funds would be depleted if this continued. Thus, economic recovery would be vital to help families survive.

Table 2 shows the student conditions on mental health and emotional well-being where the Guidance Services Unit (GSU) could help. It determined the living conditions, current physical condition, type of counseling, and future webinars that students would be interested.

Table 1. Flexible Learning Program Implementation Needs (n = 4,591)

FLP Implementation Needs		Percentage
Internet accessibility	Yes	64.40
	No	35.06
Daily spending on the internet for educational purposes	Php 50.00	47.20
	Php 40.00	3.30
	Php 30.00	14.20
	Php 20.00	13.90
	Php 10.00	8.20
	I cannot spend anything	13.20
*Personally owned gadgets	Android smartphone	74.30
	Laptop	27.70
	Personal computer	10.80
	Ordinary phone	18.50
	Apple iOS smartphone	9.70
	Android tablet	1.90
	iPad	1.30
	No gadget at all	1.50
*Common way to access the internet	Mobile data	70.10
	Internet access at home	4.10
	Internet café	16.10
	Wi-Fi/peso net	52.60
	Others	1.40

*Students checked multiple answers. It meant that they could answer more than based on their availability or accessibility.

The data revealed that the majority of students were living with their parents. However, it would also be notable that several of them lived with relatives, in dorms, and others. With the home isolation, they needed emotional support. On the other hand, it would also be notable that many students were surviving and happy and satisfied with their physical condition amidst the pandemic. Still, it could not also be denied that there were students who were in bad shape and significantly needed help because their physical living condition was not safe. It would be alarming and urgent assistance from the guidance office would be required. Vermote *et al.* [6] emphasized that "satisfaction of these needs would be important also in times of insecurity, while need frustration represents a risk factor for maladjustment during such times." The university would not want the increasing number of suicide cases in the country.

Concerning the type of counseling, students preferred to have a group and individual sessions, respectively. It would be an excellent way to call out among the students. They also shared that they would be interested in career advising, coping with

Table 2. Student Services on Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being (n = 4,591)

Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being		Percentage
Living conditions	Staying with parents	84.20
	Staying with relatives	10.80
	Others	5.00
Current physical condition	I'm surviving! I could manage despite the challenges.	41.00
	I'm happy and satisfied... just enough for my needs.	30.30
	I'm happy and satisfied with my physical living condition.	26.50
	I'm in bad shape. I need help!	1.00
	I'm extremely in bad shape! I need help because my physical living condition is not safe for me (physically or emotionally battered).	00.07
	Others	1.13
Type of counseling	Individual	47.60
	Group limited to five	49.60
	Others	2.80
Future webinars interested in	Career advising opportunities	50.00
	Coping with the new normal	27.90
	Nourishing relationships during this pandemic	20.50
	Others	1.60

the new normal and nourishing healthy relationships during this pandemic to be considered topics in the webinars.

As an intervention of the university based on these findings, in the previous school year, it allocated a mobile load allowance, and almost a thousand tablets were provided to the students. Based on this recent data, the university allotted Php 4.8M for the students' mobile load allowance, which has been allotted for the 2022 budget. In addition to the FLP implementation needs of the students, this budget allocation would benefit most of the respondents dependent on mobile data usage to access USTeP and educational sites.

The university has three licensed guidance counselors for the student's mental health and emotional well-being projects and programs. CMO No. 09, series of 2013, stipulated a 1:1000 ratio for licensed guidance counselors having a 13,379-student population for the First Semester of SY 2021-2022. However, very few were applying for the licensed guidance counselors, as the Human Resource and Management Office reported. As an additional service, e-counseling was provided wherein guidance counselors would communicate to students via mobile phone or any video conference platform that students would be comfortable with. The We Care application, a mobile app,

has also been developed by the student leaders and won as the world champion among the 34 countries during the Global Leaders' e-Conference. It would be a good platform where students could use the app for mental health and emotional well-being-related concerns.

The implications of these university initiatives would help address the concerns of the students in adapting to the new normal. However, with these challenging and trying times, students would need all the support that USTP could offer, ensuring that the students would not be alone in this quest.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing the needs of the new students would help them on their smooth transition to university life and adapt to the new normal. Having students from various backgrounds, particularly those in need, USTP CDO created opportunities for them to be assisted in the FLP implementation and for their mental health and emotional well-being. With limited mobility and financial resources, students could still have an opportunity to learn and continue to achieve their aspiration to complete their desired degree. With limited mobility and financial resources, and if the budget warrants, the university would continue to provide this assistance to the students and consider hiring more licensed guidance counselors in preparation for the limited face-to-face class implementation.

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