

Student Support Services in ODL: Observations Distilled From Philippine Experience

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Introduction

Student Support Services as Normative Component of University Governance

Student support services is an entire system of administrative and operational mechanisms and procedures that are designed to assist the student undertake his independent learning experience (Librero, 2006). Among other things, the student support services includes providing complete information about fees, technology employed, and even expectations and responsibilities and everything they need to know so student can arrive at informed decisions.

Some of the specific services that must be provided include scholarship programs, library services, enrollment and registration support services, access to information about academic progress, admission, retention, and grievance procedures. In other words, everything that is needed to facilitate learning ought to be provided by the institution offering distance education programs.

All educational institutions have, as part of their operations, what can be described as student support services. This type of services is more important to some institutions than to others. But it is always present. Major or minor component of an educational institution's fundamental operations, student support services is likely the one that most students consider the most relevant to their needs.

Various services our institutions provide our students today may be called different and more enlightening names, but all these are classifiable under a generic system of services we normally call student support services. This generic term actually became fashionable when distance education programs became more popular and prevalent.

Therefore, today, an educational institution provides both academic and non-academic services to its students not simply as an administrative function but as a significant support to the learning process that students go through.

Traditional Issues About Student Support Services

From the point of view of Philippine experience, two important issues raised as a reaction to the establishment in 1995 of the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) were that

distance education practically eliminated the socialization function of conventional schooling, and distance education was potentially going to lower the academic standards for which the University of the Philippines was known.

It has always been claimed that conventional schooling provides the individual students opportunity to experience first hand the socialization function of conventional campuses. Under this situation, learners are able to interact with one another face-to-face, which is a prerequisite to more meaningful social intercourse.

When distance learning was still conducted purely through correspondence, this social-interaction issue was very significant. There was no disagreement regarding the negative impact of lack of face-to-face interactions between teachers and students, and among students. However, given the nature of the electronic world today, this issue is no longer as problematic.

How about the issue of distance education bringing down the academic standards? A very convenient issue, indeed, for who is not concerned about academic standards? As in most other higher education institutions in other countries, when distance education was formally introduced as a means of delivering formal degree programs in the Philippines the greater number of educational policy and decision makers quickly raised the alarm bells regarding academic standards. They had claimed that in distance education we would have to lower the standards of higher education mainly because the teacher would no longer exercise effective supervision over students in the classrooms and that students would no longer be subject to the rigors of supervised and disciplined classroom discussion.

This was understandable, even if only an assumption about what could possibly happen. The fact was, it was not only teachers in conventional institutions who were concerned about maintaining high academic standards. Those involved in distance education were as concerned if not more so about maintaining standards. This was the reason why the control mechanisms in distance education, if followed religiously, are much more stringent than those in conventional schooling. This, however, is not fully understandable to those not involved directly in the implementation of distance education programs. Those taking the responsibility to deliver academic programs in the distance mode know exactly how much more stringent they have become in order to maintain the academic standards of higher education.

These two issues were major ones that the UPOU had to contend with in its initial years. Over a period of a dozen years, however, the UPOU has turned the tables around. We now find that UPOU-published books and modules are being bought by both professor and student not only from other higher education institutions in the country who have less access to quality educational materials but even professor and student from the University of the Philippines itself where the most vocal critics have been huddled over the years.

The most vocal critics of UPOU during the initial years from 1995-2000 come from the University of the Philippines itself, which is the mother institution of the UPOU. Interestingly, in the last five years, the voices of dissent have increasingly become less critical but became more accommodating. The original critics of UPOU have even become very supportive mainly because we have shown them that we were able to reach more Filipinos and maintain high academic standards. When our critics saw the quality of instructional packages we were producing, they actually started using them in their respective conventional teaching tasks and asked their students to purchase the books published by the UPOU.

I am not saying here that we were able to convince them turn around 180 degrees, but I can say that we got them to turn around some 160 degrees, which is something that we have been very comfortable with.

Redefining Student Support Services at UPOU

Student Support Services as Major Component of University Governance

When the UPOU was established in 1995, it had the Office of the Chancellor which was assisted by the Office of the Vice Chancellor Academic Affairs (OVCAA). Under the OVCAA were two offices: Office of Academic Support and Instructional Services (OASIS), and the Office of Student Support Services (OSSS). These two offices were each headed by a Director.

In April 1996, the OSSS was elevated into the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Student Support Services (OVCSSS) (Padolina, 1999). In 1999, a new President of the University of the Philippines was appointed, one who did not completely agree with the establishment of the UPOU even if he might have agreed with the concept of distance education as a necessary option. The new President's actions regarding the UPOU from 1999 to 2000 were simply just to coast along perhaps in difference to the UPOU Chancellor who was completing her second term. The new President's intentions regarding the UPOU became clearer in 2001: the UPOU had to be downgraded to perhaps a university system wide instructional materials production center. The task of navigating UPOU through such troubled waters fell on the shoulders of this author who was then just appointed the Chancellor of UPOU in 2001.

We looked at the organizational structure of the UPOU at that time and found that it was a bit top heavy. There were four vice chancellors and five faculty deans administering 18 academic degree programs with a total of 1,500 students. This was what we could not defend before the probing eyes of UP System officials who were determined to downgrade the UPOU. A strategic move of the UPOU during that time was to downsize rather than downgrade. Hence, we agreed to reduce the number of vice chancellors from four to two, and faculty deans from five to three. In the process, we had to dissolve the position of the vice chancellor for student support services and transferred the functions of student support services back to an enhanced Office of the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs.

The justification of this move was that the academic-oriented elements of student support services should not be separated by bureaucratic lines from the administrative-oriented elements because these tasks were actually part of a continuum that is called student support services. The transfer of student support services back to the OVCAA, while it might have appeared to have reduced the extent of student support services, actually was justified given the small student population of the UPOU. It was argued that when the UPOU shall have increased substantially its student population it would actually be much easier to reinstate the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Student Support Services. The move did not at all reduce the significance of the functions of student support services. In fact, it even tightened the processes and procedures. Even the past officials of the University of the Philippines who were responsible for the establishment of the UPOU agreed in private talks that this was a strategic move and was acceptable at the time it was introduced. In 2004, therefore, the UPOU was officially reorganized and down-sized. Today, the Chancellor is assisted administratively by the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Finance and Administration.

Student Support Services as Basis for Redefining Classroom Dynamics

To be sure, the professors of UPOU did not start out as practitioners of distance education. They were teachers trained in conventional classroom instruction who had dared to try innovative ways to delivering their messages to their students. Even then when they were younger faculty members they were considered more daring among the faculty members of the University of the Philippines in terms of strategies employed in their teaching tasks. Many have moved out of the box of classroom instruction and employed collaborative strategies, experiential techniques, and discovery methods of instruction. In some ways, they were trail blazers in tertiary instruction. To them it was good that they were teaching college students who were a bit more matured intellectually and willing to undertake certain learning tasks on their own.

When the UPOU was established, one of the primary functions of the leaders of the UPOU then was to identify the innovative faculty members and invite them as affiliate faculty members of the UPOU. These faculty members were actually eager to join the UPOU because the teaching-learning environment offered by the open university seemed to support their teaching styles. Many of these faculty members actually officially transferred to the UPOU from their original campuses, and they found the work environment at UPOU to be appropriate to their respective innovative nature. They were now in a position to redefine the classroom dynamics that they had to contend with within the conventional classroom situation. They had to conceptualize how they could operate effectively and efficiently under the environment of distance education. They had to make adjustments, though, in many areas.

First, they had to reconsider their teaching styles if such style did not suit the new learning paradigm. They now have to deal with much older learners, who are more experienced, gainfully employed, and out of the classroom. They would now deal with learners who are much more aggressive in terms of pushing their ideas, who are much more vocal about their complaints in terms of the instructional materials that they have access to, and their desire to have access to the professor 24/7.

Second, they had to learn to be instructional designers. When they were still teaching in conventional classrooms they were not concerned about whether or not their lectures were understood. At UPOU, they had to consciously design their modules so that they can be self-learned by their students. They had to learn to second guess their students so that they may be able to provide answers to question yet to be asked.

Third, they had to be accessible practically 24/7 through various means of communication, and particularly through mobile communication and through the Internet. Distance learners hardly make a distinction between day and night when they want to consult with their professors, and they demand that they be attended to right away.

Fourth, they had to learn to be guidance counselors. Frequently, distance learners simply need to consult with their professors on a variety of interests, but specifically regarding academic issues and concerns. The faculty member had better have a good grasp of academic policies, procedures, rules, and regulations. They must have a good handle of the university's manual of operations because they will need to dish out these pieces of information to a number of inquiring students sooner or later. In the same vein, the faculty member must have a knack for listening to learners' personal problems and provide appropriate counsel at any given time.

Fifth, they must be good with electronic communication systems, including setting up and moderating e-discussion boards. Many students still do not have a good working knowledge of some of these technologies so the teacher will have to be technical adviser most of the time.

Student Support Services Increases Learner Communication Opportunities

In conventional systems, student support services become more difficult and cumbersome as one moves away from the campus. In distance education, however, student support services require that various efficient electronic means of communication must be put in place. At the UPOU, learners have access to any of the offices of the UPOU through the Internet, landline, mobile communication, and even face-to-face means of communication through the Learning Centers and Testing Centers.

The point being made is that the more services that must be provided the student, the more ways the students must be able to communicate with university officials and other students at any given time. The communication environment and system within which learners have to interact with their teachers have become much more sophisticated and multi-channeled than it has ever been before. This, of course, depends on how much effort is being put into the process by the learners, the teachers and tutors, and the delivery system, the triumvirate that spells the fundamental procedures of distance learning.

Potential Directions

Evolving Student Support Services Concerns

Student support services in conventional systems have always been focused on specific activities such as those that are offered on campus. In open and distance learning situations, however, the additional types of services that have to be attended to include providing effective and efficient mediated delivery services, student access through non-conventional means, and most of all effective and efficient use of the Internet and other devices and procedures that have to be provided in an e-Learning environment.

1. The directions in this area include more sophisticated materials treatment, packaging, and delivery mechanisms such as the use of podcasting and vodcasting, including a more extensive use of mobile telephony for content delivery. There will be greater efforts at improving instructional design techniques that would improve content treatment and storing of materials in mobile devices such as MP4 gadgets so that even while being mobile themselves (as at a time that the learner perhaps is out in the open field jogging or doing outdoor physical activities for which he/she does have some available "downtime") learners would still have the opportunity to access their learning packages.
2. There will likely be increased amount of efforts put into improved instructional design particularly in the use of mobile telephony to deliver instructional content. Hence, there would be an opportunity for providers to introduce lesson-on-demand mechanisms.

3. More and more educational institutions will generate international following through transnational education arrangements thereby requiring standards that cut across national boundaries and institutional policies. Consequently, there will be a resurgence of interest in cross crediting among institutions offering distance programs. To deal with this concern, there will be increased efforts at collaborative and joint offering of degree programs among institutions across national boundaries.

Need for Sophisticated Collaborative Efforts Among Regional Institutions

We will see, for example, a situation where two or more open universities will get together and jointly develop academic degree programs and offer this simultaneously in their respective translated versions. Three years ago, we introduced this concept whereby Universitas Terbuka of Indonesia, Sokhuthai Thammathirat Open University, and the University of the Philippines Open University would jointly develop a Master of Arts in Science Teaching program that would be offered by UT in Bahasa, STOU in Thai, and UPOU in English. We were unable to push this, but I see that this will eventually materialize in the next few years.

The Pan Asian Networking of Distance Learning Technologies (Asia) or PAN-DLT (Asia) has been implementing a regional research on distance learning in Asia the past three years called Networking Distance Learning Technology Engines for Research. This is an IDRC initiative that is being coordinated by the Virtual University of Pakistan and participated in by nine countries in the region, including ASEAN member countries. Within the month, however, this initiative shall come to a close after putting together a substantial amount of new knowledge about distance education in Asia, including a proposed online training course called Instructional Design Training for ICT-Based Distance Learning in Asia. This is another sophisticated collaborative effort at the regional level where practitioners of distance learning will greatly benefit from.

More Sophisticated Learning Assessment Techniques

We are going to see increasing efforts at designing more practicable ways of assessing learning outcomes. In the new learning paradigm, we are saying that learning is measured by the ability of the learner to use the new information and new knowledge one has just learned to solve an existing problem. We will see new learning assessment instruments that would tend to operationalize this assessment concept.

More specifically, we will see that within the next few years learning outcomes shall be demonstrated through a new concept called DVD – digital video drama. In this concept, for example, and depending on the subject matter, students will begin producing digital video materials where they shall demonstrate what they shall have learned from their lessons. For example, students assigned to read a novel will likely think of writing the a production script based on the novel they have read and perform this on digital video. It will be the digital video that would demonstrate whether or not they understood the message of the novel. I understand that there are initial efforts towards this approach at least in a particular high school in Singapore, which was cited by Singapore's Prime Minister Lee in his lecture at the National University of Singapore on August 19, 2007.

At the UPOU, I have started designing a Doctor of Communication program which is by Research and by Distance Mode. This program shall not require formal courses as part of the program itself.

Applicants would be evaluated by a panel of interviewers to establish whether or not the applicant is prepared for the program. If an applicant is found wanting in theory and research methods, the applicant would be required to enroll in generic courses, which shall not be credited towards the program. Since there would be no formal courses in the program, the entire Doctor of Communication program shall be worth 48 credit units, which is the number of credits units normally comprising a doctorate program. The important requirements of the program however, comprises of academic journal publications. An applicant, shall present and defend before the evaluation committee a research program framework indicating what research he shall undertake. Each of the studies undertaken in this research program shall be written and published in peer reviewed journals. All in all, the student must publish five journal articles (all peer-reviewed) in three international (one of which must be ISI-listed) and no more than two local journals in the discipline. The student remains in the program for as long as he is working on his research and continues publishing. If he is able to publish five journal articles as required even before the ten-semester time frame for the program, he will be awarded the degree. Otherwise, he keeps on plugging along.

Just-in-Time and On-Demand Programs Services

A current opportunity to introduce innovative programs is in the area of professional development through nonformal certification programs for successful professionals such as administrators of higher education institutions who may be more interested to learn new ways of doing things rather than to earn additional academic degrees. These administrators have obtained their respective advanced degrees like doctorates earlier on but now see the need for updating and upgrading their knowledge and skills in order to be more effective and efficient at what they now do.

In other words, educational institutions such as open universities will have to design upgrading programs for those who have already achieved significant levels of success in their respective professions and for those changing professions in the desire to achieve more in other fields of endeavor while they are still professionally active. These are what I call just-in-time or on-demand programs that require additional if not new student support services mechanisms.

Concluding Statement

Indeed, effective and efficient student support services will continue to be a major concern among providers of distance and open learning initiatives. The more sophisticated the academic degree programs shall be introduced by the various open universities, the more extensive, sophisticated, and interactive student support services shall be in the next decade. All the efforts at enhancing student support services shall be greatly influenced by the ever increasing miniaturization of communication technologies that shall be carriers of instructional content.

Another important development that we all must watch is the changing demographics of those entering the educational enterprise as learners. The trend, it has been pointed out by experts, is for professionals in the future (starting now) to be pursuing four to five jobs in their professional lives, which means that they would need skills upgrading training at any time. These are the older learners, while the younger learners will graduate as quickly as they possibly can to land jobs mostly in the call center industry for the first five years of their professional lives and then seek new

jobs elsewhere for which they would need new training. It shall now be the responsibility of distance education institutions to provide these opportunities for older learners.

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