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Student perceptions on online student discipline programs and services

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Abstract: As the pandemic hit, the delivery of student programs and services was greatly affected. A transition such as this paved the way for the needed attention to carefully consider the offerings provided for the students which will now be staged in the digital space. Action research was used in this study with the objectives focusing on the students' perceptions of student discipline programs and services towards the use of online platforms. This also looked into the new roles and competencies of educators in this space. The identified gaps and resolutions to transitioning online for the office's programs and services, including implications to the roles and competencies of its personnel, were deemed to facilitate the establishment of priorities in responding to the pandemic situation. This research study was viewed from the perspectives of a digital campus ecology as well as self-determination theory.

Key Words: campus ecology; online competencies; online programs; student discipline

1. INTRODUCTION

The pandemic has forced the education sector to rethink and explore how to provide services and programs in the online setting. As covid-19 lockdowns hit, the delivery of student programs and services was greatly affected. Studies (Ní Shé, Farrell, Brunton, Costello, Donlon, Trevaskis & Eccles, 2019; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009) reported on the nature and effects of e-learning and the use of the online platform created critical issues that are worth exploring. The technological advances, its role in the identity formation and perhaps the set of expectations that students in this generation are more easily acquainted now as compared to before have set forth that adaptation to e-learning and its services is a minimal challenge. Nonetheless, not everyone is capable of readily providing services in the online platform. The belief of moving from one modality to a new system may have been underrated including, but not limited to, the risks that follow in the online platform.

Suddenly transitioning the office's programs and services to the digital space in order to respond to the demands of the situation also required a perspective that was able to capture the processes, people and program requirements of the new environment, both for students and staff. Banning's ecological model (1978) has been used in designing campus spaces that ensured student development from various areas (Banning, 2002; Pizzuti-Ashby & Alary, 2008; Kretovics, 2003). We also need to look at the new space where this development will occur - the digital space. Coming from a developing country, the idea of providing educational programs and services completely online is novel. However, literature has shown that this type of education is not new and is called in different terms such as distance education or distance learning (Kretovics, 2003), e-learning (Davies & Graff, 2005) and online learning (DeNeui & Dodge, 2006).

Considerably, human beings are predetermined to move by mere motivation regardless of its nature and purpose (e.g. survival, safety needs). Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) suggests that as "people generate tendencies for growth and fulfill psychological needs, they strive towards accomplishing these 3 areas: a) autonomy (essential for optimal functioning), b) relatedness (need for belongingness and connectedness) and, c) competence (feelings of being effective in tasks/work)" (p 68. par 4). It is also in this light that the authors were impelled in directing probable ways on how students (service recipient) and online educators

(service provider) may at the same time, gain a two-way understanding of the relationship between these two groups from the student's perspectives.

1.1 Purpose and rationale

Normally, the student discipline office's programs and services are presented in the traditional face-to-face set-up. This study presumed that it is inevitable that some programs and services may not be convertible to online offerings. However, with the goal of improving its offerings and knowing which of the office's activities are relevant to its primary stakeholders – the students, especially given the sudden usage of online platforms forced by the pandemic situation, the following research has been undertaken. This study aimed to explore the office's programs and services relevant to students in the online platform; identify the gaps to and resolutions in the online programs and services; and establish online educator roles and competencies for personnel.

1.2 Context

At the time of the research, the lockdown situation has surprised many. The mandate to continue education in the online realm made many of us, the office included, to rethink how to continually provide value to the students. The office's programs and services have, for a long time, been used to face to face interactions. Surely, traversing to the digital space will require new sets of competencies that the staff would need to reskill themselves, as well as making the programs and services relevant and responsive to the students' needs.

The office has two groups of student volunteers who are trained and well-versed in its operations and programs, particularly involving student interfaces. The handlers of both student groups under the office initiated to identify the needs of students in the new space of interaction, as well as transform the office's programs and services that will be responsive to the digital platform. This also necessitates the reskilling or upskilling of the staff who will be implementing these online.

Banning (1978) proposed the notion of campus ecology, particularly, in the student affairs. He believed that studying the relationship between the campus environment and the student is the essence of this perspective. In the same monograph, Kaiser (1978) presented two primary dimensions of analysis for this campus ecology model, namely, consciousness and spaces. Consciousness being the awareness of certain properties of experience, whereas, spaces being the stimuli in consciousness. Focused on the dynamic relationship between students and the campus environment, campus ecology was proposed to be a method that conceptualizes the student development process "to bring about change in the campus ecology that will enhance the growth and wellbeing of all students" (Banning & Bryner, 2001).

Young people of today, our students, are technologically fluent and need to be oriented towards digital citizenship (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009). Kretovics (2003) noted that providing cyber-services to students should not only be accessible but also integrated with one another. He continued that, in the digital space, student affairs professionals will still have to facilitate the psychosocial and cognitive development of students. Thus, the staff should be able to navigate the system in order to help the student in his virtual experience of the campus. Kretovics also pointed out that these virtual services need to be provided in a concerted manner and should create a sense of community, just like how it is in the physical campus.

2. METHODOLOGY

An action research has been carried out with the objective of finding answers to immediate concerns of adapting to the current situation. "Action research combines a substantive act with a research procedure; it is an action disciplined by enquiry, a personal attempt at understanding while engaged in a process of improvement and reform." (Hopkins, 2002, p.42, in Costello, 2003, p.5). It "aims to contribute to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation...there is a dual commitment to study a system and concurrently to collaborate with members of the system in changing it in what is together regarded as a desirable direction." (O'Brien, 2001). This study incorporates the process suggested by Mertler (2012) in conducting action research.

As the focus of the study has been identified, the researchers proceeded to gather information on the topic, including reviewing literature on the phenomenon. The research plan was then crafted which consisted two parts: an online focus group of key informants and a survey to capture the thoughts of a bigger audience. The implementation, thus, included two phases. The first phase included the creation of questions for the focus group discussion and the survey, as well as the pilot testing; and the second phase comprised the actual delivery of the focus group discussion among key informants, followed by the distribution of e-survey via the student volunteer group pages and their networks.

With the distanced situation brought about by the virus, the online focus group discussion involving six (6) active student volunteers representing the two student groups of the office has been carried out. Questions have been initially piloted to five (5) student volunteers with similar profiles, one group with two students, and the other with three. Informed consent was provided during the process, including recording of the session. Due to the richness of the discussion in the pilot groups, the responses of the pilot group participants were also included in the analysis of the results.

The analytical process has been thoroughly documented. Notes among the researchers have been compared. Thematic analysis was conducted where themes from the discussion have been extracted. Initial themes were discussed and explored. This has been an iterative process of looking at the data, discussing the responses, developing the theme, replacing themes as the data required, subsuming similar themes, even setting aside developed themes. Thus, the development of the final themes has undergone several discussions among the researchers. These were categorized as global themes, with particular sub-themes, as well as the specifics to these themes.

The online survey adapted from Ní Shé, C., Farrell, O., Brunton, J., Costello, E., Donlon, E., Trevaskis, S., Eccles, S. (2019) was used to look at the expected online educator roles and competencies that are relevant to students. Mean averages were used to interpret the results. Likewise, the survey questions were piloted to student volunteers and necessary revisions on some items were made. Hence, due to changes in some items, only those who were part of the final survey were extracted (dropped out rate of the initial 5 students).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Story and outcomes

A. Survey Demographics

More than 50% of the respondents (36.7% and 29.4%) came from the College of Business (RVRCOB) and College of Engineering (GCOE), respectively. About a third of the respondents were from College of Liberal Arts (CLA) 13.8%, College of Science (COS) 9.2%, and School of Economics (SOE) 3.7%. Roughly 10% came from College of Computer Science (CCS) 4.6% and College of Education (BAGCED) 2.8%.

Five of the respondents were part of the pilot testing of the survey. Hence, in the analysis of the survey results, these were dropped out as there were items that were revised that led to the missing responses for the first 5 respondents.

B. Programs and Services Online

Faced with the pandemic situation and the online space everyone was grappling with, the development of the questions aimed to understand and address the needs of the students when the office's programs and services are translated to this setting. Being the primary beneficiaries of the programs and services, it is important to reflect on the transitions to a new learning environment to come from how they perceive them in order to meet their needs. Cortesi, et al (2020) advocated to consider context in mind as important when initiatives that aim for youth online engagement are created.

It is interesting to note that students consider the programs and services of the office in its entirety worthy of transportation online. The FGD themes, however, yielded surprising findings for the researchers. For the areas explored in this study, namely the gaps and their resolutions, two global themes emerged: the critical importance of communication for students, as well as the improvement of the systems and processes in the office.

B.1 Communication

The online space seems to have afforded students with a plethora of options for communicating with them – ranging from the social media platforms such as Facebook, Messenger, Twitter and the likes (which they strongly advocate for) to email, Google, the Help Desk Announcement (HDA) of the university and its learning management system (LMS) which is Canvas, specifically through its Homepage. The use of this online medium of communication does not discount the usage of cellphones and a text blast system for this purpose.

The importance of communication is also underscored in the students' perception of the office's programs and services when translated online such as, again, in maximizing the use of social media platforms, this time for its education and advocacy programs, information campaigns and dissemination purposes, with examples of reviewing the existing collaterals and of developing additional materials fit to the platform such as focusing on online etiquette, materials on particular values (e.g. honesty, plagiarism, cheating); focusing on positivity through affirmation posters and giving assistance to faculty in ensuring student online decorum (e.g. how to address class properly, how to keep students' attention, formation aspect). Students also mentioned the use of

community forums for advocacies, creation of websites and doing the student volunteers' recruitment, training and workshops in the online platform.

Camus, Hurt, Larson & Prevost (2016) investigated the use of Facebook and its effects on student participation and found that such social media platforms not only provide social benefits to students but "might also represent a viable mechanism for educational information exchange and learning." However, they also emphasized the importance of the university's learning management system being possibly more effective for academic development. They added that the usage of these platforms supports diverse communication and behavior norms for the students. It is interesting to note that for the effective use of social media platforms, students surmised that the staff, with many finding the use of online technology new and daunting, be able to provide improved means of communication. This includes that important information reaches the community members given that students themselves are not fond of opening their emails and have trouble sustaining their focus and controlling distractions. They also provided ways to respond to these presented challenges by using multiple modalities to reach them, crafting announcements in succinct forms and uniformly with other materials. Students suggested that in the usage of this platform, it is critical that the presentation of materials is appealing and, if referring to processes, that pictures be used for step-by-step guidelines.

This finding on communication in this study also highlights the need of students for personal connections. One-on-one mentoring, one of the programs and services of the office, is seen as a crucial element for students, regarded as giving "personal" touch to the virtual transactions happening in the new platform. SDT's regard to relatedness is highlighted here. Relatedness is about caring, mutual respect and being able to rely on others (Deci et al, 2001), features also found in the mentoring programs. This also applies to other usual "face-to-face" interactions such as case conferences, meetings, and training. However, also perceived as a challenge given the nature of these transactions, students recommend that these types of meetings be held short, on-point and well-thought out. The seamlessness of a virtual campus experience as posited by Kretovics (2003) for students may have to factor in the seeming birth pains of a fully online campus that students and staff are unaccustomed to.

B.2 Systems and Processes

Another interesting global theme that came out of the findings was the students' concern with improving the systems and processes in the office when adopting the online space. In congruence with the students' perceptions of what the office is likely to confront, Baard, Deci & Ryan (2004) learned that competence needs satisfaction, along with relatedness and autonomy, is likely to promote work performance and adjustment. The staff personnel, being used to face-to-face interactions in their delivery modes of the office's offerings, the whole transport to the virtual sphere may seem daunting, even though pronouncements and some aspects of activities utilize computer and internet technology, these are but on a minimal level. Students suggested improving the record management system by creating an online database, developing monitoring systems for services and data encoding, and assuring data confidentiality. Being adept in the usage of online applications, the students recommended maximizing Google with its apps such as Google Drive, Google Forms and Gmail in addressing document submission, monitoring and reviews. They also suggested using Zoom for implementing student volunteer programs such as, but not limited to, recruitment activities.

The current findings of this study approximate the results of Peacock and Grande (2016) that found highly positive responses in the uses of Google Drive, Google Docs, Google Forms and Google Sheets among students. Their findings suggest that the online platform allowed for the simplicity of accessibility and, even, the opportunity to collaborate between faculty and students.

B.3 Other Challenges

Notably perceived by the students, challenges in the online platform, for both students and staff, include access to resources (e.g. stability of internet connection) and learning the skills to adapt to the internet technology and the campus's learning management system are real. Students reported juggling their academic priorities and adjusting their usage of social media and Canvas, since many are still unfamiliar with the latter. For the staff members who are dazed with the complexities of the digital space, students suggested also training with the university's LMS.

It is noteworthy that these students who recommend these possibilities also take note of the importance of data confidentiality. Taking this into consideration, students in this study seem to exhibit responsible behavior in the online sphere. Greenhow & Robelia (2009) urged a digital citizenship which requires its citizenry to uphold standards of responsible and safe use of technology. The extent of

this citizenship clearly goes beyond responsibility and merits a different study.

The recommendations that the students provided appear to be viable options for the continuity of the office's programs and services in the online setting. Regardless, the campus space and the delivery of programs for the development of students have been forced to look at a different ecological picture of where these formations will happen. The virtual environment will have to be able to deliver the educational outcomes that the former face-to-face learning setting yielded.

C. Online Competencies and Roles

In order to prepare for the transition completely to an online platform, the skillsets of the implementing staff may need to be modified to suit the needs of the new setting. Ní Shé, Farrell, Brunton, Costello, Donlon, Trevaskis & Eccles (2019) list of online competencies and educator roles shed light to these issues. In terms of competencies in the online space, the mean averages (n=104) in the survey show that students prize knowledge of content (4.76) and communication skills (4.73) compared with teaching strategies/models through use of internet tools (4.51), providing opportunities to perform and receive feedback (4.45), simulating significant real life problems and demonstrating leadership qualities (4.38), promoting of interactivity and sense of belonging within the group (4.33), managing group (4.21), conducting and integrating research (4.11) and establishing rules and regulations and time management (4.01). These online competencies results prove that, regardless of the set-up, online educators need to be able to, not only show but also, communicate to students that they are content experts, a result which will also be reverberated below.

As for online educator roles, teacher (4.72), content expert (4.46), social (4.39), facilitator (4.30), evaluator (4.27), instructional designer (4.20), technical (4.14), researcher (4.05) and managerial (3.93). Thanaraj (2016) recommended that an academic would need effective support to make their online transition successful. This would mean they need to be able to embrace the role and practice changes and, consequently, their identity.

D. Study Outcomes

Given the findings in this study, initiatives in the office were started. Addressing what were pointed out as communication, and systems and processes concerns, can only be done so through a know-how of the digital space everyone is now confronted with. The importance of training the staff was imperative in order to meet the needs of students as found in this research. Thus, a technology training series for staff personnel was started to provide the necessary building blocks for carrying on the programs and services of the office. As the personnel learn the ropes of technology, the issues of establishing brief, concise, and appealing communication means and methods are being tackled and faced, as well as developing the online systems and processes unique to the office operations. The use of email, social media platforms, video conferencing methods, as well as Google applications were just some of the topics that the training focused on. Staff personnel were encouraged to commune with the transition, as everybody is in this journey together. As for concerns on internet stability, these are beyond the control of the researchers, albeit availability of devices was checked and provided for by the university. As programs and services are continually provided in this new digital space, it is inevitable that the basic knowledge of technology will have to advance and evolve with the times and needs of students.

3.1 Self-reflection and learning

The authors have prior basic knowledge of conducting research in this field. However, the process of the actual gathering of information from the respondents in the online platform is relatively new as well. Although there were areas that were taken as precautionary measures, such as briefing and debriefing within the research team prior the actual course of data collection, the natural observation was deemed limited as the online platform has some restrictions that included, but not limited to, the observations of nonverbal gestures, rapport building and more in-depth discussions on the subject matter as time was limited and the virtual space also somewhat confounding naturalistic observation.

On the other hand, given the limited virtual space, it is worth noting that the gathered information resulted in some consistency across the respondents where open communication and openness to new programs and services are welcomed and are perceived needs of the students, who are themselves mostly in the online platform. As a field researcher who maximizes the use of technology, it was at first an overwhelming scenario to be situated in the same realm of transitioning from the face-to-face setting to an online platform. It somewhat depicted the actual challenges our respondents may have felt, as the researchers were student formators as well. The

survey results brought out realizations and well-informed need competencies that we may need to put greater value and further these areas to strengthen as educators. The entire process of coming up with the desired output in improving the office's existing programs and services for its students also allowed the researchers to look into areas that were already appreciated by the students, and in turn might need to be well promoted and strengthened further.

Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory states the importance of the following: a) competence (the need for mastery), b) autonomy (the need to be actual agents) and, c) relatedness (the need to interact). This theory supports the presumption that when student's needs are met through understanding their perceived needs and in turn, provided to them, their expansion of oneself may be achieved. This may be linked through as they become connected to others, while being self-fulfilled and independent. In the same manner, SDT may support the importance of exploring areas of the online educators' competencies in order to provide better services. As the online educators are one of the primary key stakeholders who work with students, providing them areas for honing their skills towards fulfilling their own competence, this may likely be beneficial to both the students (service recipient) and the online educator (service provider). Furthermore, the need for affiliation (McClelland Need Theory) posits that "a person who may have this high need may desire to be accepted." Thus, it can be inferred that across the shared experiences and insight reflections in the FGD responses, the students' desires for a support system within the school context purports that college students, regardless of their year level, may still need to be accepted through the schools' offered programs wherein they can be themselves openly.

Furthermore, with the discussion of a virtual environment, the mention of digital citizenship has been inevitable. The way the students advocated for safe use of technology, particularly in data protection, assumes an aspect of this notion. However, the extent of the practice of digital citizenry warrants another study.

The survey on the competencies results was drawn to be an essential next step in order to support and provide what was expected from the office's personnel. In terms of student perceptions of online competencies and roles, it is recommended that this study be conducted in a wider scale, particularly for the Asian setting where preparedness to these transitions is based on economic and technological capacities of nations. This certainly has implications to national development and training needs of educational service providers.

When the pandemic is finally lifted, the way the world worked under the confines of lockdowns and work from home settings will surely change how we do things when we return to the regular face to face environment. One great possibility is the adoption of a full online learning provided as an option to students and prospects. As part of a developing nation, it seems that from the panic we have experienced in this pandemic educational scenario, we became sudden digital immigrants to these students who are digital natives (Prensky, 2001) and revealed to us the uncomfortable truth that we have a lot to learn to be able to catch up and prepare ourselves competently for this, and the next, generation of learners.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The online campus space and the virtual experiences of the students on the delivery of the student discipline office's programs and services show the inevitable need to competently traverse cyberspace and digitally upskill the staff in order for effective student formation to happen. This virtual ecology will have to be able to meet the learners' needs and achieve educational outcomes that the former face-to-face learning setting would yield.

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