

Constructing Paulinian Student Leadership during the Covid-19 Quarantine Period: Reflections towards Pandemic-Responsive Student Leadership Formation

¹Brian Saludes Bantugan, ²Elmgay Valeriano

St. Paul University Manila

Abstract: This study sought to uncover how the pandemic shaped the leadership of student leaders in St. Paul University Manila by engaging 31 current student leaders who volunteered to participate in this qualitative research through an open-ended Google Form questionnaire. The study revealed that as Filipinos, the students had a heightened awareness of negative reaction to government misconduct, sense of social issues and their social responsibility, and awareness of stress and health. In their local communities, they were concerned about mobility issues, health protocols concerns, community service opportunities, and the problematic pause of pre-COVID-19 norms. In their families, they were confronted with choosing between one's self or family, family over self, and their relationship more because of the pandemic. As they were considered leaders outside of the campus, they continued to experience a sense of togetherness, live out the Paulinian core values, and strive to be better for others. Despite their isolation, they continued to see the value of communication, achieving goals, and managing shortcomings. These resulted in a discussion that can help the university develop a student leadership program for student leaders who seem to be incapacitated by the pandemic.

Keywords: Student Leadership, Quarantine, St. Paul University Manila, Pandemic

I. Introduction

On March 16, 2020, St. Paul University Manila officially shut down its face-to-face instructional delivery in response to the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) order of the Philippine government vis-a-vis the COVID-19 pandemic. The shutdown happened in the middle of the second semester; hence, the university had to find a way to continue teaching students without the traditional mode of delivery and despite adequate preparation and provisions for a flexible learning mode. Some universities decided to suspend synchronous and asynchronous classes altogether when the ECQ was extended for a week in the Mega Manila area (Nolasco, 2020) to prioritize the well-being of their stakeholders. The face-to-face instructional delivery remains suspended one year after the implementation of the ECQ.

This change in the instructional delivery not only brought learning challenges (Baticulon et al., 2021); it also presented challenges to the holistic formation, especially for schools that look after the integral formation of their learners like St. Paul University Manila. The holistic formation is an approach to education that enables learners to "'to be' not only academically competent in their field, but also socially, psychologically, spiritually and physically competent in their field" (Shaw, 2019, para. 3). With many resources for student development in suspended animation due to the school shutdowns, co-curricular and extracurricular activities of students are suspended until administrators find alternatives. Immediately after lockdowns were imposed, schools scammed to make sure that the minimum requirements of courses taken by students are learned despite new learning set-ups. However, efforts to articulate non-academic formation during COVID-19 were not as emphasized. Learning opportunities outside of the classroom have fizzled out because of quarantine restrictions. However, if

non-academic formation is equally important in holistic formation as academic formation, schools must also ensure the former.

Student leadership is one area of holistic formation of students that has been pushed to the side after the closure of schools due to COVID-19. While the mental health of the students has risen to the foreground as an agenda for school managers during the pandemic because the lack of mental health impedes optimal learning (Vanderlind, n.d.), it is not the same for the leadership development of students. This is not surprising because curricular offerings have clear target outcomes that are measured regularly; the leadership formation of students does not have clear outcomes and assessments and evaluations even if "Student leadership is an integral part of student (and school) success" (Rodriguez & Villareal, 2003). Because leadership pervades schools at every level (Education Development Trust, 2020), resources needed in the development of students are available. The absence of a leadership development program for students at a time when leadership is most needed in society reflects a gap not only in holistic student development but also in the effective management of institutions that are expected to champion it.

This paper takes off from an interpretive and critical perspective that asserts leadership as "socially constructed in ongoing processes of intersubjective understandings" (Kjellström et al, 2020, para. 15). To study leadership in the context of the social and collective dimensions of student leadership, the dominant ideas that inform it, and the way the pandemic shaped it in St. Paul University Manila must be investigated. As a social construct, leadership must be understood as "something that happens when people construct meaning in action" (Ospina & Schall, 2001, para. 20). Drath (2001 in Schall, 2001) wrote further that "leadership happens when people in a community create a shared understanding of their mutual and moral obligations so that their common cause is realized" (para. 20). As such, this paper seeks to answer the question, "How did the pandemic construct the leadership of student leaders in St. Paul University Manila?" By answering this question, the study expects to surface reflective questions that can help administrators create programs that can facilitate student leadership development in the university during the pandemic and other similar scenarios.

II. Methodology

The study is a qualitative study that employed an online open-ended survey accessible through Google Forms to 31 student leaders of St. Paul University Manila who volunteered to participate. The online survey included 10 open-ended questions that inquired about how the COVID-19 affected them in their different social affiliations; (a) as a Filipino; (b) as a local community member; (c) as a family member; (d) as a Paulinian; and (e) as a student leader. The answers were textually analyzed. Themes were generated to surface social categories that are implicated in the lives of the participants while they remain in quarantine.

III. Results

Paulinian student leaders as Filipinos in the context of COVID-19

Heightened awareness of and negative reaction to government misconduct. Asked how COVID-19 affected them as Filipinos, student leaders underscored their heightened awareness of government misaction and failure of the system. They were not satisfied with the way the government was acting, leading one participant to say "there could've been a better way in responding to the pandemic." One perceived the government as having no clear plan. Another said that mis-appointed government officials are selfish and greedy, negligent, entitled, incompetent and unprepared, hypocritical, lacking in compassion and sense of urgency, perhaps, evil, saying "This health crisis must be handled by the professionals in the medical field, public health, our scientists and researchers for a better, faster, and efficient response that would put an end to this crisis." Other participants felt proud of Filipinos who were resilient but ashamed of and saddened by

government officials who took advantage of Filipinos' vulnerability during the pandemic. These sentiments surface as a result of a growing desire for compassion and justice.

Heightened sense of social issues and their social responsibility. On the other hand, one participant noted that while in quarantine they became more aware of their surroundings; hence, they felt compelled to register as new voters and cease staying quiet (voice out one's principles or political stand). One felt frustrated not being able to physically help because of the lockdown. Meanwhile, another participant became much more socially involved by watching the news. Any of these may be reason enough for one participant to admit feeling frustrated not being able to physically help during the pandemic, especially when resources and services are available. The desire for unity was expressed.

Heightened awareness of stress and health. Mental health was also revealed as something challenging many Filipinos. One participant admitted to becoming more conscious about health, in general; hence, one was quick to write about their growing dependence on online shopping to not contribute to the rise in infections. One shared being highly aware of COVID-19 cases near their area. To minimize stress, one student leader shared that taking a social media timeout is beneficial, especially when Filipinos have become less hospitable to others, and there is a need to minimize negative thoughts, if not, bring more hope.

IV. Paulinian student leaders in their local communities in the context of COVID-19

Mobility issues. Being unable to go outside of one's house is reflected by the student leaders as more striking at the local level, where they live. What makes it stressful is that they are not capable of performing the simplest of errands, and attending to their usual religious rituals. At first glance, it seems petty; however, being student leaders who are often entrusted with responsibilities that are sometimes beyond what they are comfortable with, being all of a sudden unable to do the simplest of chores is something akin to social life paralysis - feeling unproductive and useless, said one participant, or unable to interact with and extend help to neighbors and extended family members. One of the participants who is also a local leader expressed pride in "being called to be in the frontline assisting the community by providing them real-time information and updates to combat the spread of COVID-19 in their small ways."

Health protocol issues. Concerns about health protocols not being observed by everyone in the community fuel extreme caution. Being more responsible meant being more careful even when following proper health protocols. There is fear and anxiety felt even when a student leader is already acting responsibly. There is worry about social interaction particularly because (not in spite) of the safety protocols, said one participant. There is worry about catching the virus even if one were to stay at home 24/7 according to another participant. It seems that the health protocols imposed by the government are not considered by some participants as adequate to protect even the most socially responsible and health-conscious people in the community.

Community service opportunities. Student leaders who are given opportunities to reach out and make a difference in their local communities seem to be in a better disposition. One participant acknowledged that the pandemic made them more aware of their surroundings, the need for compassion, and what people can do to help those in need. Similarly, one participant shared that the pandemic made them more concerned about their community and more involved with some of the volunteer work that the community needs. Seeing community members reach out to those in need helps pacify the worries of one participant who appreciated the care and compassion shown to families most affected by the virus. Another participant saw value in the village becoming more open and friendly because they supported local online businesses. One participant who was afraid to leave the safety of their home decided to volunteer virtually. With greater sensitivity and awareness of well-meaning people and the need to serve the community, one participant said, the crisis brought greater appreciation for essential workers, especially those who are taken for granted.

The problematic pause of pre-COVID-19 norms. Reflecting on the local level, some participants highlighted the difficulties of not doing or completely losing the "usual". Virtual schooling was difficult because the change to the new form of schooling was too abrupt, especially when a student dealing with mental health challenges and feelings of hopelessness and cynicism that came from the current state of politics, uncertainties of the future, disruptions in interpersonal relationships, and the inactivity or sense of disengagement one finds in the local community.

V. Paulinian student leaders in their families in the context of COVID-19

Family or self? The pandemic intensified or clarified problems that were often made more bearable or unreal, respectively, by the students' physical attendance in school, and consequently, physical distance from the family. With that, one participant admitted finding it difficult to have time for the self. Parents not coming to join a participant or a participant unable to join family members elsewhere highlights the difficulty of choosing to remain apart to lessen the possibility of family members infecting each other.

Family over self. The struggles of family members led some participants to sacrifice self-expression or lose sleep over worries about parents being exposed at work. Parents, meanwhile, choose to work and accept being vulnerable to continue to support their families financially. To help neutralize the burden carried by family members, a participant intentionally tries to make them laugh. Another emphasized the value of being strong and remaining cautious for family members. And still, another helps by doing chores at homes to reduce their expenses, going beyond accomplishing just academic responsibilities. Worrying over senior family members or bearing with the isolation, while causing stress, was something one participant chose to accept to care for family members or support them who choose to risk their health and safety for the family, respectively.

Relationship beyond the crisis. Most participants attest to having experienced improved and strengthened family relationships resulting from increased quality time together at home and freer communication. One participant shared that social media turned to be a disconnecter in the family after realizing the importance of the family in times of uncertainty. Another participant has learned to see arguments and heated debates as merely a manifestation of innate differences between family members that no one has control over - indicating the development of greater patience and understanding in the family despite the increased stress brought on by the pandemic. This growing bond between, appreciation of, and confidence in family members reflect in participants' growing desire to help financially, if possible, lift the spirit of family members, catch up on each other's lives (even just in an online family group chat), or grow together in religious practice. On the downside, greater concern for members of the family also translated to increased anxieties in one participant.

VI. Paulinian student leaders as learners in the context of COVID-19

Online learning challenges. It is unanimous among the participants that the shift to online learning was not easy. Even for one who is more adept with the use of technology, the stress brought about by the pandemic that threatened students' psycho-emotional and physical health impeded their learning and coping, in general. Most of the participants were demotivated and exhausted (even more burned out than face-to-face classes) by being on the monitor during and beyond synchronous learning sessions, which was further worsened by anxieties, bad Internet connections, and the overlapping of school and non-school work at home (which extended stressing over academic tasks). Aware of their schoolmate's struggles, a participant hesitates to tap the help of peers when dealing with understanding lessons. Their experiences indicate that the quality of learning depended on the quality of face-to-face socialization with peers and mentors and some students recognize that the latter cannot be replaced adequately by online interactions. One participant shared that having company while learning surely has a positive impact and leads to an increase in their productivity. Taking more time to

adjust intensified performance worries. One student mentioned losing one's sense of time that tended to extend periods working on school requirements. Their homes being not conducive to pre-COVID-19 learning burdened participants who could not find ways to improve their domestic set-ups.

Learning below expectations. Some participants expressed worries about not learning enough or being up to par with how much they learned before the pandemic. Participants who worried about below-par clinical training and learning in the professional setting were upset that alternative delivery modes will not provide them enough to pass board exam requirements and professional competencies. Others admitted to doing school work out of compliance and not out of genuine desire to learn, given the stressful circumstances. The desire to learn is replaced by a surrender to feelings of uncertainty and inadequacy which they are aware of and feel bad about. Hopes of deepening relationships with peers in their final year or improving one's competencies were challenged by the pandemic, and knowing that their plans and prospects have been crushed they often feel shortchanged. One participant noted that if getting more out of their training meant paying extra, s/he/they was open to doing so. Diminished learning in the final year in the university was disappointing, according to one participant. Having gone through online learning, one participant became convinced that it is a kind of instructional delivery that is not something for her/him/them. Another said it was a waste of time. A few had depressive episodes and breakdowns because of disappointment and frustration.

Limited destressing options. One participant shared that being trapped at home limited their options to ease away their emotional troubles. One student missed the relaxing environment of the school. Another admitted that time spent with peers or with the Paulinian family after class served as their stress-reliever; unfortunately, that is no longer an option during the pandemic. With the restrictions, they are left to make do with family members or themselves. Time with the self allowed one to reflect on their ability to continue schooling despite the odds, the reality of life and death, and on ways to improve one's self (including one's academic effectiveness, efficiency, and productivity). That said, participants sought ways to destress despite limited options at home to be able to cope with their academic responsibilities, in particular, and the pandemic, in general.

VII. Paulinian student leaders outside of school in the context of COVID-19

A sense of togetherness. Whether physical or online, the participants mention missing being with Paulinians they mingle within the school and do things together. This is not merely a general seeking of social encounter resulting from the lockdowns because some participants mention being one with Paulinians as a strong characteristic of Paulinians; hence, the university is considered by the participants as their second home due to its family spirit and welcoming environment that one participant noted as one that keeps her/him/them going. One participant shared longing for school activities and events that they used to do. Another shared reminiscing about going back to school. Still, another confided missing the people who genuinely cared about them, communicated regularly, and find ways to help.

Living out the Paulinian core values. Because of the lockdowns, some participants feel bad that they cannot be of help to anyone. One participant cited the Paulinian core values as most important at this time. Another participant admitted having difficulty living them out because they find themselves trapped in a bubble built by their being self-absorbed, anxious, and lack of trust in a higher being who can light their way in the darkest of times and must be placed at the center of their lives. Being physically away from school also meant difficulties in keeping one's faith strong. Despite the weaknesses experienced by them, one of the participants said that they owe it to their education to be charitable and compassionate. Some participants saw the pandemic as a challenge to be more generous and hopeful and to strive to be a role model to others the way other members of the community molded them. Despite the difficulties, one participant insisted that one must persevere.

Striving to be better for others. Whether it is about making their parents proud, sharing one's strengths and abilities with others, or engaging with the community, some participants associate the feeling of wanting to do things for others during the pandemic as distinctly Paulinian. Learning more about other religions was considered an effect of COVID-19 on their lives Paulinians.

VIII. Paulinian students as leaders in the context of COVID-19

Communication. The online platform, while having an extensive reach, is often disturbed by unstable connectivity. Constituents of student leaders are often exhausted by online synchronous sessions and this makes it hard for the participants to engage students in other organizational activities. One participant mentioned having to meet with other leaders beyond convenient hours and not knowing when the meeting will finish. This adds to their existing burden as online learners are stressed out by their online activities in their courses and concerns with not learning enough despite the sacrifices. Uncertainties about where students are psycho-emotionally and not helped to deal with those problems lead participants to communication gaps, insecurities, and doubts that get in the way of executing plans and managing projects. One participant admitted to feeling very distant from fellow student leaders as a result of the communication problems. Hence, communication gaps contribute to a diminishing of one's sense of camaraderie and teamwork. Furthermore, because the pandemic led to changes in priorities in some participants, working together has become troublesome for some.

Achieving goals. Physical activities had to be migrated and converted to online equivalents which do not have the same effect as physical face-to-face ones. Online activities, while convenient, are not suitable for everyone. Not all goals can be achieved through online means. It is difficult to be personal in one's interactions given the available technology. One participant lamented that he could not give his best given the situation. Effective face-to-face leaders find themselves seriously challenged by the current situation and feel they, all of a sudden, can offer very little. Hence, one participant admitted to considering resignation due to his perceived inability to perform as he/she/they deems fit. A participant who is now in a different time zone finds it difficult to work with time differences.

Managing shortcomings. Many participants feel restricted. Plans remained merely plans. Activities could not be organized as intended. Not being able to achieve goals as they have planned frustrates participants. Some participants find themselves doubting their leadership abilities, and ability to solve problems posed by the pandemic and online learning challenges. Worrying about their struggles and the struggles of their constituents requiring more resources than what was required before COVID-19 led to school closures. But some of the participants consider the limitations set by the pandemic as a challenge towards achieving greater leadership, accepting a future with far greater problems, learning more from real life, taking a chance to try harder, providing better self-care, becoming more open-minded, adaptable, flexible, creative, compassionate and caring, patient, laid-back, stern, service-oriented, strategic, transcending, hopeful, conscientious about one's tasks, persistent in developing friendships, driven to improve one's self, and realistic.

IX. Discussion

The student leaders' experiences of COVID-19 as Filipinos brought them closer to greater self and socio-political awareness. Their concern for personal safety and health that are endangered by exposure to the virus and increased stress made them concerned about immediate dangers that limit their mobility and capacity to act as responsible Filipinos that government leaders have failed to become. The failure of the government to efficiently serve, the student leaders' inability to become agents of service, and the dangers posed by acting as a leader in social activities during the pandemic put the student leaders in an ethical dilemma. **What can St. Paul University Manila do to help these students deal with this ethical dilemma?**

Insights about how COVID-19 affected the participants in their local communities gravitated towards concerns related to micro-level practices. Pre-COVID-19 norms were put to a full stop by COVID-19 health protocols and community quarantines or lockdowns. Student leaders have acquired ways of operating that have allowed them greater functionality and productivity before the pandemic. All of a sudden, it was gone. Being the usual active leaders that they are, they struggle with their diminished capacity vis-a-vis their growing desire to serve their local community. Community service opportunities are considered meaningful and drive them to volunteer in ways they are capable of despite mobility and health protocol issues. However, not all of them are ready to serve immediately. Those who are, act in response to issues or opportunities or both. Given that, **how can St. Paul University Manila form all Paulinians, not just student leaders, become more socially responsive, without compromising their health and safety? How can student leaders who are burdened by worries, uncertainties about the future, and anxieties about their loss of the pre-COVID-19 norms be helped?**

The pandemic highlighted students' awareness of the efforts that their family members do for each other, even if it requires self-sacrifice and the difficulty of doing the same if it gets in the way of one's personal space and self-expression that are crucial in a balanced communication between members of a team called family. As the participants negotiate the pros and cons of choices they make to help ease the burden of family members who make the greatest sacrifices, they struggle with stress alone, if relationships with family members also cause it, or with family members if their relationship is in a good place. The family, it seems, became a site of relationship challenges that can have positive and negative effects, if handled properly and with the help of family members. Choosing to be away from the family can easily be mistaken as keeping one's distance from the family instead of an effort to self-care to care for members of the family if there is no healthy communication between members of the family. Most participants found their path to effective communication; however, some struggled with communication and could not go beyond existing conflict with members, consequently choosing to take advantage of the separation the pandemic imposed on some families. Some sentiments revealed that schooling in pre-COVID-19 times served as a legitimate escape from family issues. **How can St. Paul University Manila help student leaders who find it difficult to communicate their issues with family members while they are in contact with the school community? How can the school help their families reciprocate students' efforts to reach out at a time when it is most important?**

Reflections on how COVID-19 affected the participants as students brought out statements that reflected unease after realizing their academic losses and inability to adjust and face the challenges head-on. Students who value learning easily notice the difference in their learning opportunities and capacities and feel bad about it. More than just students, they easily admit their weaknesses and have little excuse to show. They are also very clear about the irreplaceable value of interpersonal encounters in their lives as students and leaders. As leaders, they deal with followers or different stakeholders. Nowadays, online interactions have very little semblance with face-to-face encounters that are their usual routes to learning. Deprived of interpersonal encounters, their capacity to learn and lead has been diminished. **How can St. Paul University Manila help compensate for the diminished face-to-face encounters that challenge the leadership capacities of current leaders and potentials of leaders-to-be?**

When asked how COVID-19 affected them as Paulinians, the participants' responses resonated with the social dimensions of their formation as Paulinians. The sense of togetherness speaks volumes about how students do things to accomplish goals. Living out the Paulinian core values in the time of the pandemic is indicative of the depth these values were embedded in their consciousness. Striving to be better for others reflects a sense of purpose that was behind their striving for self-improvement and excellence, especially during trying times. **How can St. Paul University Manila help them translate their sense of togetherness, attachment to the Paulinian core values, and intent to serve to the online environment and in the context of an online community?**

The participants realize the inadequacies of the online platform as a tool to achieve the goals of a Paulinian student leader. There is an awareness that existing communication technology cannot compare with face-to-face communication. They are also aware that in certain situations it is not the best tool for a Paulinian student leader. Often, the goals of a Paulinian student leader were not shaped by a completely online leadership environment; hence, they realized that they had to revamp and redesign projects and activities that had to be executed using an inadequate and sometimes malfunctioning technology. Time differences make the same technology even more inconvenient and useless in sustaining a team of leaders. Given that most non-leader students are already struggling with the online delivery of lessons, Paulinian student leaders have to deal with leadership challenges on top of their learning challenges. More adaptable Paulinian student leaders take the challenges in stride and find meaning in the challenges they encounter. However, not all of them are in the same disposition. **What can St. Paul University Manila do to strengthen the leadership commitment and sense of service of students, especially in the time of a pandemic?**

References

- [1.] Baticulon, R. E., Sy, J. J., Alberto, N. R. I., Baron, M. B. C., Mabulay, R. E. C., Rizada, L. G. T., Tiu, C. J. S., Clarion, C. A., & Reyes, J. C. B. (2021). Barriers to online learning in the Time of COVID-19: A national survey of medical students in the Philippines. *Medical Science Educator*, (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40670-021-01231-z>
- [2.] Education Development Trust. (2020, November 25). Key lessons in effective leadership during COVID-19 and beyond. Retrieved May 9, 2021, from <https://www.educationdevelopmenttrust.com/our-research-and-insights/commentary/key-lessons-on-effective-leadership-during-covid-1>.
- [3.] Kjellström, S., Stålné, K., & Törnblom, O. (2020, May 13). Six ways of understanding leadership development: An exploration of increasing complexity. *Leadership*, 16(24). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715020926731>.
- [4.] Nolasco, E. J. P. (2020, April 6). Students urge schools to extend academic break amid rising COVID-19 cases. Retrieved May 9, 2020, from <https://www.rappler.com/moveph/students-urge-schools-suspend-online-classes-rising-coronavirus-cases-april-2021>.
- [5.] Rodriguez, R. G. & Villareal, A. (2003). Promoting student leadership in campus - creating a culture of engagement. Retrieved May 9, 2021, from <https://www.idra.org/resource-center/promoting-student-leadership-on-campus/>.
- [6.] Shaw, P. G. (2019). Expanding beyond the classroom: Adopting a holistic focus on student formation. Retrieved May 9, 2021, from https://evollution.com/attracting-students/todays_learner/expanding-beyond-the-classroom-adopting-a-holistic-focus-on-student-formation/.
- [7.] Vanderlind, R. (n.d.). Effects of mental health on student learning. *TLAR*, 22(2), 39-58. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1154566.pdf>.