

Overcoming Challenges: The Faculty Center Experience

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It was April 1, 2016, Friday, around 1:00 in the morning when my phone rang. I would usually turn off my phone before going to sleep but for some strange reason, I left it on. A colleague, Diliman Information Office Director Dr. Sir Anril Tiatco, tensely told me, “FC is on fire!” My immediate response was “What?” then after a few seconds I said, “Okay, I’ll see you there!”

My daughter accompanied me to UP. We parked near the Vargas Museum and walked toward the corner of Roces and Roxas Streets while seeing the flames consume the 3rd floor. Fire trucks kept coming but there was not enough water to stop the fire from spreading. All we could do was watch and think of the many treasures, books, valuable artifacts, and documents lost because of this fire. We were hoping that the whole 2nd floor would be spared. At around 5:00 am, the firefighters declared that the fire was “under control.” We decided to go home so I could prepare to go back to the office by 8:00 am. While driving home and even on my way back to UP, so many questions came to mind: What do I do when I get to UP? Do we go on with our classes? How do we continue with office work? Where will the faculty hold office? How do we rebuild such a historic building?

It was my 11th month as Dean of the College of Arts and Letters (CAL) when the tragic Faculty Center (FC) fire happened. Looking back, I believe my training in the theatre helped me in coping with and addressing this crisis and other challenging situations during my term.

How does one make sense of a crisis? How does one handle such a situation? Here is how I/we made it through the FC fire:

1. Stay calm and collected. – *A performer usually feels ‘butterflies in the stomach’ before a performance but once s/he steps onto the stage, the nervousness gradually subsides.*

Before going back to UP on the morning of April 1, I had to compose myself so I could focus on what had to be done, what had to be prioritized. I had to project and communicate that everything, more or less, was under control. Staying calm helped me think and focus. There was a need to stay composed so that the others would also calm down and feel safe.

To be able to stay calm and collected, there was also a need to release mixed and intense emotions. I remember crying at nights while pondering on what I was supposed to do the following day. Another way I was able to release mixed and intense emotions was through morning talks over coffee with College Secretary Jose Carlo de Pano. We would see each other early in the morning, before going to the office, just for a simple chit chat or to casually discuss administrative matters that need to be addressed.

2. Safety first. – *Before the show starts, the stage manager needs to check and ensure that everything is in place and that the stage and other areas of the theater are suitable for the performance. The production and house managers, on the other hand, check the auditorium or audience area and the front of house or lobby of the theater to ensure the safety and comfort of the audience.*

Since the smoke (gases and fine particles) from the fire could affect one’s health, we decided to close down the adjacent CAL building and have it checked by experts from the Institute of Environmental Science and Meteorology, led by Dr. Mylene Cayetano. It took a few weeks before we could use the classrooms again. Equally important to physical safety is psychological wellness. Colleagues from the Department of Psychology came over to provide comfort and support to the faculty and staff as we gathered in the corner room along Palma Hall Pavilion 1. We also organized a psychosocial support workshop, facilitated by Dr. Divine Love Salvador, for the administrative staff.

There was a period after the fire that the faculty and staff were allowed to enter FC to retrieve their belongings or office properties. CAL Building Administrator, Eric Juanillo, had to ensure that safety protocols were being followed by those who wanted to enter the premises.

3. Quick thinking. – *If a performer suddenly forgets a line or two, s/he would ad-lib to move forward with the scene. If there is a missing/misplaced prop while the show is ongoing, the stage manager would have to immediately look for a substitute.*

It was also a blessing that Palma Hall Pavilions 1 and 3 had been renovated and were ready for use. The corner room in Pavilion 1 was originally assigned to the College Secretary’s Office, while the other rooms were to be used as classrooms. Together with the College Executive Committee (or College Execom), we decided to assign these rooms and divide them to make spaces for the offices of the Dean, College Secretary, and Associate Deans. We also had to allot enough rooms for CAL 101, Graduate Studies Office, department offices, and the Institute of Creative Writing. The remaining rooms were converted into classrooms. Because we could not utilize the CAL Building due to the effect of the smoke, we reached out to other colleges for extra classrooms.

1 The College Executive Committee was composed of Asst. Prof. Jose Carlo de Pano (College Secretary), Dr. Aileen Salonga (Associate Dean for Academic Affairs), Asst. Prof. Alden Lauzon (Associate Dean for Administration and Development), and Dr. Isabelita Reyes (Associate Dean for Research, Creative Work, and Publication).

4. The show must go on. – *This saying emphasizes to every member of the production that whatever happens, the show must continue since there is an audience waiting for the performance. We are often told that the only excuse for not performing is either “you’re dead or dying.”*

Although we were struck with a plethora of emotions, we had to find ways to continue with office operations. Our Administrative Officer, Rolando Tagaban, led our staff members in looking for pieces of furniture from the Property Office to be able to organize an office. They were successful in getting enough tables, chairs, and other essentials for the staff of the Dean’s Office and the College Secretary’s Office. The goal was to create some sense of normalcy in the office. It was not easy. It was, in fact, very challenging to work with a heavy heart, but there were tasks that needed to be accomplished. Work should not stop. Our work never stopped.

5. Communicate regularly. – *Communication lines among all members of the production are kept open for updates and announcements. It is important to immediately inform the stage or production manager if there are concerns which need to be addressed promptly.*

It was important to provide the CAL community with updates on the next steps. Members of the College Execom met regularly for updates and announcements for the faculty, students, and staff and to determine what needed to be addressed. We communicated regularly with the UP officials, led by UP Diliman Chancellor Michael Tan and UP President Alfredo Pascual, to remind them of our immediate needs and concerns. We also reached out to the CAL alumni and the general public for assistance in the purchase of supplies, furniture, and other office and classroom equipment.

Listening to the different stakeholders (i.e. faculty, students, staff, and University administrators) —their current state, challenges, and concerns—was necessary to know how the college should move forward.

6. Working together. – *A theatre performance is produced as a result of the collaboration of the director, actors, designers, production staff, and artists. Every member of the team plays a role and works for the success of the production.*

Everyone’s cooperation was necessary for things to move forward. The administrative personnel had to retrieve, reconstruct, and rework important documents. We were fortunate that the human resources files and the undergraduate students’ records were spared by the fire, but we had to rebuild the records of the graduate students.

We were already scheduled to conduct a fire drill in April as part of the Disaster and Risk Reduction Management (DRRM) Plan of the College when the fire struck. The UP Vanguard, through Atty. Spocky Farolan, assisted us in training the personnel in the conduct of the drills. We made sure that a drill was held every semester to prepare the faculty, students, and staff and make it a habit. Several members of the administrative staff also became members of the UP Diliman DRRM Team.

On April 3, Sunday, we organized a solidarity program titled *Bangon CAL-CSSP*. The program started with a mass for healing followed by performances and messages from the faculty and staff of the two colleges. Although the FC was being managed by CAL, the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy (CSSP) had several departments (namely Linguistics, History, Philosophy, and Political Science) with administrative and faculty offices housed in the Faculty Center.

7. Prioritize. – *If there are budgetary constraints in the purchase of certain items for the production, there is a need to prioritize which items are really essential and which ones can wait or may have an alternative.*

The FC fire was an unprecedented situation which required real time problem solving. There was no manual or guidebook for an administrator to follow. We had to prioritize issues that required immediate attention: the need for offices and classrooms, office and audio visual equipment, financial assistance for the faculty and staff, renovation of the CAL Building to comply with the fire and safety requirements. While these were going on, talks with the UP System administration regarding the plan for a new building for the college started before the end of 2016.

Aside from the infrastructure concerns and need for equipment, we had to address the needs of the faculty and staff. Our appeal for financial assistance for CAL and CSSP faculty and professors emeriti, as well as the staff affected by the fire was granted by the University administration. We had to look for other fund sources for our lecturers. Fortunately, there were generous donors who responded to our call.

8. Be grateful and hopeful. – *Before the start of a performance, there is a company prayer where members of the production express their thanksgiving, well wishes, request for guidance and success of the performance, as well as the safety of the company and the audience.*

Despite this tragedy, we were grateful that no one got hurt during the fire. We were even more grateful to CAL alumni and people from all walks of life who were more than willing to provide assistance (donations, equipment, supplies, and services) to the college. Through their donations, we were able to gradually rebuild the offices and classrooms. The then Dean of the College of Law, Atty. Danilo Concepcion, offered the use of the College of Law's wing in the Acacia Dorm as temporary faculty rooms. The Office of the UP President provided the office furniture and air conditioning units for the faculty rooms. The College of Science, through Dean Jose Maria Balmaceda, was the first to respond to our call for office supplies. They also allowed us to use several classrooms for the displaced classes in the CAL Building.

We also organized the blessing of the offices and classrooms in Pavilions 1 and 3 and the CAL faculty and staff as we resumed our work in the newly renovated spaces. It was a way for us to express our gratitude for the safety of the faculty and staff and also request for guidance in managing the College during this challenging time.

The College is truly fortunate and grateful for all the assistance extended by the University and its officials as well as individuals who provided support.

Lessons Learned

I started my term as dean with a three-year plan for the College but the priorities changed after the FC fire. It made me refocus and address more immediate concerns. We had to convert these challenges into opportunities that would work for the College's advantage. Since I believe in the saying "a good leader is a good follower," I was very hands-on when it came to managing college affairs because this helped me better understand the situation and context.

Involving the administrative staff in the planning and emphasizing the importance of their role in the whole process were strategies that motivated and enabled them to contribute toward the success of the College. Teamwork and getting the cooperation of all stakeholders enabled us to survive and overcome this tragedy.

One very interesting observation was how productive the faculty became months after the FC fire. More junior faculty members were attending conferences and there were more publications produced by the faculty. This was reflected in the ‘outstanding’ rating the college received in the granting of the performance-based bonus for the next 2 years. I believe these activities were also ways to cope with the grief and overcome the loss.

To better prepare ourselves and avoid future fires, we conduct fire (and even earthquake) drills every semester; staff members undergo disaster risk reduction and management trainings, purchase safety equipment (such as fire extinguishers and disaster response equipment), and regularly conduct facility inspection and maintenance.

In handling a crisis situation, we must stay calm and collected, think of everybody’s safety first, make quick decisions to immediately address pressing concerns, continue the work that we are supposed to do, communicate regularly with the people concerned, work as a team, prioritize what needs to be done, and be grateful and hopeful that everything will turn out well.

Concluding Reflection

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts...
As You Like It, Act II, Scene VII,
William Shakespeare (1564-1616)*

The Faculty Center was home to many scholar-artists and the core of the academic life of the College of Arts and Letters and UP Diliman. The fire incident on April Fools’ Day was a terrible joke. It was an incident, caused by electrical problems, beyond anybody’s control.

So much of life requires creativity. My exposure to theatre and the arts continue to hone my skills necessary to adapt to the challenges in my personal and professional life. Creativity allows me to see things differently and find ways around obstacles. It teaches me the need to take risks and accept failure. It helps me cope with stress and anxiety.

The sound of a fire truck siren would always remind me of that ill-fated incident on April Fools’ Day 2016; but it also reminds me that with a clear vision, trust in the people and process, hope and optimism, any challenge will be overcome.

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