

Frontline Workers in UP Pampanga during the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Transition to the Blended Learning Modality

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced educational institutions in the Philippines and abroad to undertake reskilling and upskilling of their faculty members and lecturers but there is a common perception that their frontline workers or administrative staff are being left out in these efforts. This study investigated how the frontline workers of the University of the Philippines Diliman Extension Program in Pampanga (UP Pampanga) dealt with the disruption brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to a blended learning modality. The theory of street-level bureaucracy by Michael Lipsky was used as the study's framework. The qualitative data needed for the study were collected through interviews with all 15 staff members of UP Pampanga with the aid of a guide questionnaire. The interview responses were summarized in a spreadsheet and the modal responses were used in identifying emerging themes and in answering the study's research question. The study found that UP Pampanga's frontline workers dealt with the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to a blended learning modality by exercising moderate discretion in the execution

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of their tasks and in rationing services. They possess the characteristics and work conditions or problems of street-level bureaucrats, particularly resource scarcity, and the relatively little guidance they receive from state university officials. The study recommends: (1) observing fairness in dealing with all the staff regardless of employment status and place of residence; (2) allowing the staff to have flexibility in operations such as taking exceptions to impractical and costly rules; (3) reskilling and upskilling of staff that go beyond trainings on data privacy, gender sensitivity, health and safety protocols, mental health, and those sponsored by their Human Resource Development Office; (4) allowing the staff to exercise discretion and autonomy in the execution of their tasks; and (5) triangulating the procedures and results of this study in future studies that take into account the perspectives of other stakeholders.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Blended learning modality, Frontline workers, Street-level bureaucrats

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted educational institutions worldwide to shift to remote or blended learning modalities. In the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) issued Memorandum No. 4 Series of 2020 which ordered all colleges and universities in the country to adopt flexible learning. Meanwhile, the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs (OVPA) of the University of the Philippines, the country's national university, released Memorandum No. 2020-31 which mandated all its constituent units to shift to remote learning. Two years later, the same office issued Memorandum No. 2022-88 which ordered the adoption of blended learning in all the constituent units of the national university.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also forced educational institutions in the Philippines and abroad to undertake reskilling and upskilling of their faculty members and lecturers, but there is a common perception that their academic and administrative staff are being left out in these efforts.

Hence, it is timely and relevant to ask how the members of the academic and administrative staff of a case state university in the province of Pampanga, Philippines, dealt with the disruption brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to a blended learning modality.

An inventory of the memoranda issued by the OVPAA, the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs (OVCAA), and the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Administration (OVCA) shows that the reskilling and upskilling efforts being undertaken by the state university are skewed in favor of faculty members and lecturers. A total of 14 OVPAA memoranda issued in 2021 and 2022 were meant to guide the faculty members and lecturers in the adoption of a remote or blended learning modality and in the preparation of course packs. Furthermore, a total of 16 OVCAA memoranda issued in 2020, 2021, and 2022 also pertained to the shift to a remote or blended learning modality and course pack preparation of faculty members and lecturers. In contrast, only seven OVCA memoranda issued in 2020, 2021, and 2022 were meant to guide the academic and administrative staff in the adoption of flexible working arrangements, such as work-from-home arrangements, during the various COVID-19 quarantine periods and alert levels.

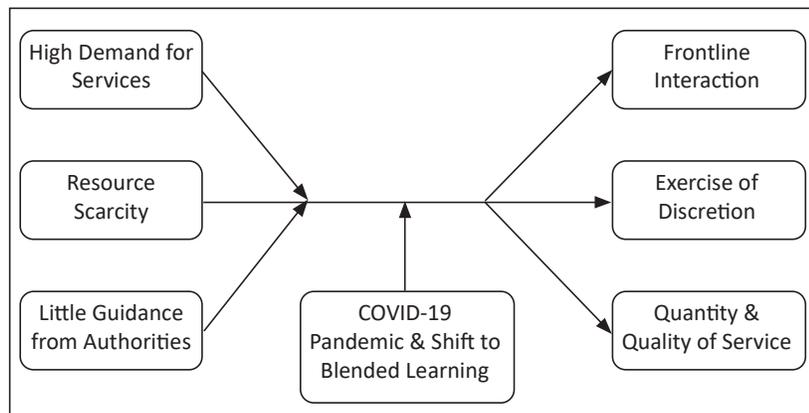
This study's objective is to investigate how the frontline workers or administrative staff of the University of the Philippines Diliman Extension Program in Pampanga (UP Pampanga; the University) dealt with the disruption brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to a blended learning modality. The theory of street-level bureaucracy by Michael Lipsky was used as the study's framework.

According to Lipsky (1969, 1980), street-level bureaucrats are government employees who: (1) are constantly called upon to interact with citizens in the regular course of their jobs; (2) have significant independence in job decision-making; and (3) potentially have extensive impact on the lives of their clients.

Lipsky's framework on street-level bureaucracy is used to explain frontline interaction, the exercise of discretion or degree of independence in job decision making, and quantity and quality of service. Street-level bureaucrats' work experiences are affected by the unavailability or scarcity of resources, physical or psychological threat,

and ambiguous, contradictory, or unattainable role expectations. In short, what the theory of street-level bureaucracy says is that, rather than being advocates for their clients, street-level bureaucrats are people who deal with difficult situations but have limited resources and little guidance from political authority. Under conditions of scarce resources and high demand, street-level bureaucrats are forced to exercise discretion and ration services. Street-level bureaucrats are often seen in schools, welfare agencies, and police departments (Frederickson & Smith, 2003). They are also present in environmental management bureaus (Sevä, 2015), health departments (Nunes & Lotta, 2019), and other lower levels of the bureaucracy (Kencana, 2017).

Figure 1. Elements of Lipsky’s Theory of Street-Level Bureaucracy Affecting Frontline Interaction, Exercise of Discretion, and Quantity & Quality of Service



In this study, the administrative staff or frontline workers of UP Pampanga are regarded as street-level bureaucrats. They are forced to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to a blended learning modality, given scarce resources, and provided little guidance from state university officials despite the continually high demand for their services. Figure 1 summarizes how the elements of Lipsky’s theory of street-level bureaucracy—high demand for services, resource scarcity, and little guidance from authority—affect frontline interaction, the exercise of discretion or degree of independence in job decision making, and the quantity and quality of service.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative research approach and a case study research design. The unit of analysis was the individual administrative staff or frontline worker of UP Pampanga. The qualitative data needed for the study were collected through interviews with all 15 administrative staff members of the case state university with the aid of a guide questionnaire. The interviews were conducted on August 2-12, 2022. Prior to the interviews, permission was sought from the Director of UP Pampanga and a written consent was obtained from the interviewees. For ethical reasons, the name of the official and the identities of the administrative staff members were kept anonymous.

During the interviews, the interviewees were first asked to classify the general nature or content of their work: whether they perform academic work (under the Office of the Program Secretary), or administrative work (under the Office of the Deputy Director). They were then asked to identify their clients: whether they serve students and alumni, faculty members and lecturers, or both. Next, they were asked to describe how their work was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to a blended learning modality.

Using a 5-point Likert scale, the interviewees were asked whether their own resources and the resources of their offices were enough to meet the demands of their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to a blended learning modality. The Likert scale had the following values and adjectival equivalents: 5 = *most sufficient*, 4 = *sufficient*, 3 = *neither sufficient nor insufficient*, 2 = *insufficient*, 1 = *most insufficient*. They were also asked to cite proof of the sufficiency or insufficiency of their resources.

Using a similar 5-point Likert scale (1 = *most insufficient* to 5 = *most sufficient*), the interviewees were also asked whether the guidance from university officials during the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to a blended learning modality were enough. They were likewise asked to cite proof of the sufficiency or insufficiency of guidance from university officials.

The interviewees were then asked to estimate the financial help or subsidy given to them by the University. They were also asked

to identify the types of training they received during the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to a blended learning modality. They were also asked to enumerate the problems they encountered during the same period and to recommend solutions for those problems.

Finally, using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *narrowest discretion* to 5 = *widest discretion*), the interviewees were asked to describe the discretion they exercised during the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to a blended learning modality. The interview responses were recorded and summarized in a spreadsheet. The modal responses were then used to identify emerging themes and to answer the study's research question.

Results and Discussion

Four interviewees classified the general nature or content of their work as being academic; they belong to the Office of the Program Secretary. Meanwhile, 11 considered their work as administrative; they are under the Office of the Deputy Director. Those who report to the Program Secretary were mostly school record evaluators (SREs) and school credit evaluators (SCEs). They identified students and alumni as their primary clients. Those who report to the Deputy Director, on the other hand, were administrative officers, administrative assistants, and administrative aides. They identified faculty members and lecturers as their main clients.

These frontline workers of UP Pampanga were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to a blended learning modality in a variety of ways. All of them were affected by the sudden halt in operations during the implementation of the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) from March to May 2020. They all experienced restrictions in mobility and difficulty in coming to work during the subsequent COVID-19 quarantine periods and alert levels.

When the university officials ordered the staff to constitute a skeleton force at work, not everyone was provided with free shuttle service. Only those whose employment status were permanent, and only those who lived in Angeles City, Mabalacat City, and the Clark Freeport Zone were provided free shuttle service. One staff member complained:

“Tilan lang silang nabigyan ng free shuttle service. Kaming mga taga Santa Ana, Arayat, at iba pang malalayong lugar ay kinailangang magcommute o gamitin ang sariling sasakyan, e ang mahal pa man din ng diesel at toll. Yung mga hindi pa permanente ang status, hindi rin nila sinama sa shuttle service kahit na taga San Fernando lang sila.”

(Only a few were given free shuttle services. Those who are from Santa Ana, Arayat, and other far-flung areas had to commute or use their own vehicles, considering that diesel and toll fees are expensive. Those whose employment status are not yet permanent were not included in the shuttle service even if they are from San Fernando only.)

The direct effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to a blended learning modality were on work processes, work hours, and use of resources. The staff saw changes in their work processes and routines. Almost all tasks had to be done online. Electronic or digital signatures were acceptable in almost all documents. Collections and payments had also become digital. Their work hours were extended. They were responding to emails, messages, and calls from superiors and clients – both internal and external – even at night. Since they do bulk of the work at home, they sometimes had to use personal funds for office supplies, internet, and mobile phone services. The staff’s personal health and safety were also affected by the pandemic. Six of them contracted COVID-19 and were taken to isolation facilities such as the one in the New Clark City, Capas, Tarlac.

When asked whether their own resources and the resources of their offices were enough to meet the demands of their work during the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to the blended learning modality, the staff had a mean response of 2.33 on the 5-point Likert scale. This score means that the staff considered their own resources and the resources of their offices to be insufficient to meet the demands of their work during the pandemic and the shift to a blended learning modality. They considered their resources insufficient because of the difficulty and high cost of transportation, high cost and instability of internet services, their use of personal supplies, and the lack of physical records.

When asked whether guidance from the university officials were enough during the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to a blended learning modality, the staff had a mean score of 2.55 on the 5-point Likert scale. This score means that the staff were indifferent. They considered the guidance from the university officials as neither sufficient nor insufficient. Those who felt that the guidance provided was enough cited the health protocols which were in place. It should however be noted that these health protocols originated from the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases and was only cascaded and enforced by local government units and the University. Meanwhile, those who considered the guidance given as insufficient gave the following reasons for their responses: (1) unclear work instructions, (2) many new policies and procedures being implemented all at once, (3) not being given enough time to adjust, (4) university and unit officials themselves not knowing what to do, and (5) too much emphasis on rules being inimical to keeping a harmonious relationship among the staff. One staff expounded on the fifth reason:

“Walang ginawa yung in-charge sa operations ng school kung di maghipit at siguraduhing lahat ng rules ay nasususnod. Kapag may violation, parusa agad. Yung mga janitor na mahigit pa sa isang dekada na nagserbisyo, di pinatawad. Nawala na tuloy yung magandang samahan dito sa school.”

(The person in-charge of operations did nothing except be strict and ensure that all rules are being followed. If there was a violation, a penalty would immediately be imposed. The janitors who had served for more than a decade were not spared. The good relationship here in school is now gone.)

Only three of the staff received *ayuda* (financial help or subsidy) from the University during the pandemic, but they could not recall exactly how much the subsidy had been. They only remembered that the subsidy was meant to defray the cost of internet when working-from-home. The 12 other staff members said that they did not receive any subsidy from the University.

Eight of the staff received training, while seven did not. The trainings were on data privacy, gender sensitivity, health and safety

protocols, mental health, and those which were sponsored by the Human Resource Development Office (HRDO) of the University. All these trainings, except the one on gender sensitivity, were meant to reskill or upskill the staff for the new normal or the post-COVID-19 pandemic period.

Aside from the sudden or unexpected changes in their work processes or routines, the staff also enumerated the following problems: (1) limited supervision from immediate superiors; (2) lack of motivation at work; (3) increasing costs of transportation, internet, and basic commodities; (4) stress from superiors; and (5) lack of trust or confidence on superiors.

The staff recommended the following to address the problems mentioned in the preceding paragraph: (1) holding regular face-to-face or online meetings with superiors; (2) learning to motivate themselves by focusing on the remaining good things about their jobs; (3) continuing and expanding the free shuttle service for all the staff; (4) demanding fair treatment and due courtesy from superiors, faculty members, and lecturers; and (5) for superiors to refrain from believing in unconfirmed reports, accusations, or complaints. One staff expressed this hope as follows:

“Sana yung mga superiors hindi lang sa isa nakikinig. Sana hindi sila basta basta naniniwala sa mga sumbong. Pakinggan muna sana nila yung magkabilang panig.”

(I hope the superiors do not listen to just one person. I hope they do not readily believe in accusations. I hope they listen first to both sides.)

Finally, when asked how much discretion they exercised at work, the staff had a mean score of 3.33 on the 5-point Likert scale. This score means that they consider their discretion as neither wide nor narrow. Among those reporting under the Office of the Program Secretary, it is the SREs and SCEs that had a relatively wide discretion. Even without direct supervision from superiors, the SREs decided on which application documents to accept or reject, and which students should be included in the official list of candidates for graduation. The SCEs on the other hand, exercised wide discretion during enrollment periods.

They had the power to enlist students in courses, lock and unlock their enlistment, generate official reports, and make official certifications of Teaching Load Credit (TLC) and Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) scores of faculty members and lecturers, among others. Since the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to a blended learning modality, the SCEs have been assisting some faculty members and lecturers in setting up their chosen learning management systems (LMSs) and in uploading their course packs in these LMSs. They have also been serving as the repository of Faculty Service Records (FSRs), course syllabi, and other records. They also process the teaching overload honoraria of faculty members which could not be paid unless the SCEs correctly prepare the corresponding overload slip.

Meanwhile, among those reporting under the Office of the Deputy Director, only the Administrative Officers (AOs) enjoyed a relatively wide discretion. They decided when the school's van could be used by the faculty members, lecturers, and the staff. They ordered the processing of basic papers of newly hired faculty members and lecturers, of renewal of appointments to the different administrative positions, of Administrative Load Credits (ALCs), of lecturers' fees, of honoraria of faculty members, and of reimbursements of unit officials. Since the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to the blended learning modality, they have also taken charge of the use of logistics funds which is used for sending physical course packs to disadvantaged students.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The administrative staff or frontline workers of UP Pampanga possess the characteristics of what Lipsky called street-level bureaucrats. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to a blended learning modality, they regularly transacted with citizens: their external clients, such as students and alumni; and internal clients, such as faculty members and lecturers. Their transactions had increasingly been done online.

The frontline workers of UP Pampanga also exercised moderate discretion during online registration or enrollment, the issuance of certifications needed by students and faculty alike, and the processing

of lecturers' fees and faculty honoraria, among others. The SCEs in particular, were relied upon by some faculty members and lecturers in setting up LMSs and in uploading course packs therein. These two tasks had become extremely necessary since the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to a blended learning modality.

The services of UP Pampanga's frontline workers affect or impact the lives of not only the students, but also of the faculty members and lecturers. For instance, the failure of the staff in charge of sending the physical course packs to disadvantaged students could result to the students' inability to learn and progress in their respective classes and degree programs. The staff's failure to assist the faculty members and lecturers in setting up LMSs could also result to the faculty members' and lecturers' inability to conduct synchronous and asynchronous online classes.

UP Pampanga's frontline workers generally considered the resources at their disposal to be insufficient to meet the increasing demand for their services. Compounding this problem is their indifference to the guidance that they had been receiving from university officials. They considered the guidance as neither sufficient nor insufficient to deal with the disruption brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to a blended learning modality. This insufficiency or scarcity of resources and the relatively little guidance received from authorities are the exact conditions of street-level bureaucrats which Lipsky had described way back in 1960 and 1980.

The study finds that the key elements of Lipsky's theory of street-level bureaucracy is applicable to the case of UP Pampanga's frontline workers. They had been exercising moderate discretion and rationing their services since the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to a blended learning modality. They adopted work-from-home arrangements and constituted themselves into a skeleton force during strict COVID-19 quarantine periods or alert levels but reverted to the regular work setup once the restrictions were lifted or became less strict. They had also migrated majority of their transactions online.

The study recommends five things. Firstly, university officials should observe fairness in dealing with all the staff regardless of their employment status and the places where they reside. For instance,

the free shuttle service should be provided not only to those with permanent status and those residing in the Angeles-Mabalacat-Clark area, but also to those with temporary or contractual status and those residing beyond the mentioned geographical area. This is because they are affected by the pandemic in the same way. Fairness also means listening to all sides and verifying the truthfulness of accusations before decisions are made, especially on matters of penalty imposition. It is also fair to accord the staff the courtesy and respect given to faculty members, lecturers, and university officials. It is likewise fair not to disturb the harmonious relationship that they had built over the years.

Secondly, university officials should allow the staff to have flexibility in dealing with the disruption brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to the blended learning modality. There are times when exceptions to the rules are called for. For instance, an OVCA memorandum calling for a centralized sending of physical course packs to disadvantaged students is impractical, costly, and counter-productive for the University's constituent unit in Pampanga. The said unit could have saved time, effort, and money if it had sent the course packs directly to its disadvantaged students in Pampanga and the rest of Central Luzon instead of sending them first to the Supply and Property Management Office (SPMO) in the main campus in Diliman, Quezon City as provided in the said OVCA memorandum.

Thirdly, the reskilling and upskilling of the academic and administrative staff should go beyond the trainings on data privacy, gender sensitivity, health and safety protocols, mental health, and those which are sponsored or conducted by the HRDO. The SCEs and SREs for instance, would benefit from seminars or webinars on the blended learning modality and outcomes-based education (OBE). They would better respond to the needs of the students in the new normal or the post-COVID-19 pandemic period if they were trained in blended learning and OBE. The AOs, administrative assistants, and administrative aides, on the other hand, would benefit from online or in-person training on total quality management (TQM). Once trained in TQM, they would be able to solve recurring workplace problems such as erroneous and late processing of teaching overload honoraria of faculty members and lecturers. By doing things right the first time and every time and by ensuring the quality of their work, they would not only satisfy but delight the internal and external customers of UP Pampanga.

Fourthly, as long as the necessary control procedures are in place, the staff should be allowed to exercise discretion and autonomy in the execution of their respective tasks. Without the appropriate discretion and autonomy, they would not be able to deal with the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to the blended learning modality. Discretion and autonomy allow them to navigate and overcome the resource scarcity they face, and the relatively little guidance they receive from university officials.

Finally, this study's procedures and results should be triangulated with other stakeholders of the University. This means that future studies should consider the perspectives of state university officials, faculty members and lecturers, and students and alumni. Only then can a balanced view of the academic and administrative staff as street-level bureaucrats be seen.

Lipsky theorized about street-level bureaucracy way back in 1969. His theory, however, remains relevant to frontline workers in government during the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to the blended learning modality. The pandemic has, no doubt, given government frontline workers high levels of stress (Lantajo, 2022). This, in turn, is expected to negatively affect their health and productivity (Abrigo, Bayudan-Dacuycuy, & Orbeta, 2023). Hence, in the post-pandemic age or the new normal, embracing new technologies and flexible working arrangements, such as working-from-home or telecommuting, becomes imperative. Ultimately, these alternative forms of work should lead to work-life balance.

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