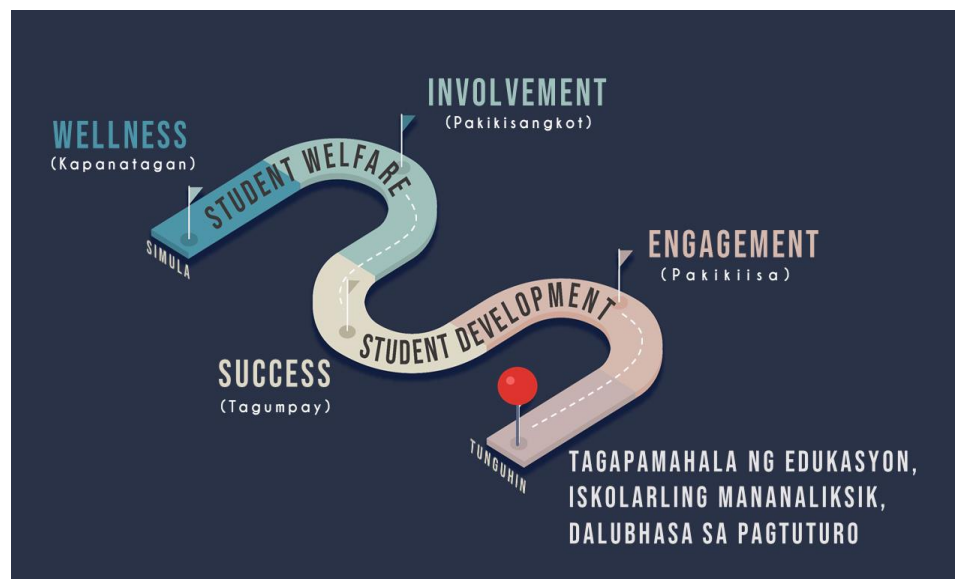




The Development of A Mental Wellness Framework for PNU Graduate Students

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The Mental Wellness Framework for PNU Graduate Students

Executive Summary

In May 2021, the PNU College of Graduate Studies and Teacher Education Research (CGSTER) formed a committee to develop a mental wellness framework for graduate students. The committee was expected to: (1) study the student needs to achieve a psychologically sound graduate student body; (2) identify gaps in the mental wellness related services provided to graduate students; (3) develop a mental wellness framework for graduate students that will define mental wellness in the context of graduate education and identify and clearly describe its dimensions; and (4) list down sample relevant activities to address all the dimensions of mental wellness. Drawing from the existing support framework of the PNU Office of Student Affairs and Student Services (OSASS) the framework, termed as *Project WISE* which stands for *Wellness, Involvement, Success and Engagement*, highlights the Wellness component. Under Wellness, two subprograms were developed: *Ginhawa* and *Kapanatagan*. This policy brief underscores the processes that were carried out in the development of a mental wellness framework for graduate students of PNU with the intention of promoting the development of such framework in other higher education institutions.

Research studies undertaken on student adjustments in a pandemic suggest the development of innovative and helpful approaches in addressing and safeguarding the mental health of students (Baloran, 2020; Tee et al., 2021). The focus on ensuring mental health among students include educational support, counseling specific to the concerns of family members contracting COVID-19, and dissatisfaction with the health information and services. These concerns should be appreciated in the light of the Philippine Mental Health Act of 2017 which created provisions for the hospital – and community-based mental healthcare in the Philippines (Lally et al., 2019). The implementation of the specific areas in addressing mental health concerns has demonstrated the significance of psychological and behavioural science-informed policymaking (Billones et al., 2021). The policies developed for students should include learners in the graduate level. The individualized and social contexts (Patias et al., 2021) of graduate students as they navigate through handling pandemic concerns related to their families, work, and school load should be considered. This policy brief provides information and elaborates on strategies that can be implemented as a response to the pandemic effects to mental health.

In May, 2021 a committee in the College of Graduate Studies and Teacher Education Research (CGSTER) was formed to develop a mental wellness framework that would serve as an anchor to the planning and management of activities that will be provided to graduate students. The Mental Wellness Framework for graduate students was based on the framework of the Office of Student Affairs and Student Services (OSASS) created last year in response to identified flexible learning needs of the students. Alignment with RA 11036 (Mental Health Act) was undertaken to harmonize the objectives of the act with the goals of flexible learning.

In doing so, the committee highlighted the following challenges and recommendations:

Challenges	Recommendations
The needs assessment questionnaire should be given at the beginning of the school year.	Administer the needs assessment at the start of the special term.
The collaboration of the different programs in the graduate school is necessary for developing a needs assessment questionnaire intended for graduate school students. There is also a need to determine the platform to implement the needs assessment survey for the graduate school students.	Maximize the use of the current needs assessment tool fielded to students during enrolment. The best online platform is through email and social networking sites.
There is an existing ISO form for the needs assessment in the OSSASS. However, a necessary platform from the Management Information System (MIS) Office to implement this to assure the confidentiality of the form is needed.	Request the CGSTER Dean to facilitate in discussing how the assessment can be shared between OSASS and the CGSTER. Proper communication between the deans is needed to filter graduate students' responses.

Likewise in the process of identifying gaps in mental wellness provided to graduate students, the committee used data from the Graduate Student Council (GSC) and OSASS.

The gaps are as follows:

1. Additional support in terms of mental health practitioners is needed. The guidance counselor in charge of graduate students, expressed that the weight of addressing both academic and emotional needs of the graduate students were overwhelming. One counselor for the entire graduate student population may not be enough.

Proposed Resolution: Gather a pool of mental health volunteers who will be trained in the intricacies of handling student problems while upholding confidentiality and respect. Nevertheless, it may be important to consider the possibility of an additional counselor being assigned to the graduate school since training volunteers also takes time and other resources.



2. Clarify the terms of reference between the committee and the OSASS.

Proposed Resolution: Clarify how the committee will be able to support OSASS programs for graduate students while designing other wellness programs as needed.

Other gaps may be explored from the results of the needs assessment. In identifying gaps in the mental wellness services, the committee will align the services provided by Graduate Research Office (GResO), Graduate Teacher Education Faculty (GTEF), and the OSASS.

In developing the mental wellness framework, the committee decided to use the four areas in the OSASS ALPAS Framework to address the wellness needs of the graduate students. The WISE Program for Graduate Students rests on the highlighted areas in the OSASS framework – student Wellness, student Involvement, student Success and student Engagement; these will serve as the guideposts for addressing student needs. Working from the framework, the committee will be harmonizing the OSASS framework with the contexts upon which our graduate students are in, activities will be made to fit the students' concerns and difficulties and provide ways of coping in both online learning and the pandemic.

Moreover, since wellness is one component of a general framework for student welfare and services, much of the committee's effort will focus on this guidepost. The other guideposts – involvement, success and engagement which completes Project WISE will be discussed, planned and implemented with wellness as the primary component. That is, Involvement activities are in consideration with whether it addresses the goals of Wellness. As a starting point for Project WISE, wellness will be CGSTER's priority and the groundwork as to which all activities will be based on.

The guideposts are described as follows:

Guidepost 1: Wellness (Ginhawa at Kapanatagan): The guidepost highlights the promotion of balance and integration among students' work, studies and family/self-concerns. In this guide post, the CGSTER and OSASS serve as sounding boards to provide an understanding and support in navigating the pandemic. This is one of the beginning guideposts as activities address the emotional and social needs of adult learners.

Ginhawa is operationalized as "*kawalan ng sakit*," "*kaibsan ng hirap*," and "*gaan sa buhay o mabuting pamumuhay*." In the wellness framework, *ginhawa* rests on the promotion of *gaan ng pakiramdam* through unloading of burden. Program development on this component rests on capacitating graduate students with the ability to acknowledge their challenges; address ways to face these challenges using their emotional resources; and seek social support (whether through the university or by seeking referral to helping institutions) – thus providing support to others as well.

Kapanatagan refers to mechanisms of support to achieve a good life characterized by healthy relationships between the students' immediate family and their PNU family (teachers, classmates, administrative staff). The goal of the *Kapanatagan* is to assist students in determining what gives them peace and tranquility and work on promoting a psychological care for oneself (self-care) and others (formation of character strengths).

Guidepost 2: Involvement (Pakikisangkot): This guidepost builds on wellness and aims to encourage student participation in all the academic and wellness activities of the college. Integral to students' involvement is a general sense of belongingness to a group which in turn enhances accountability and responsibility over group goals and efforts. *Pakikisangkot* involves coordination of CGSTER and OSASS with the graduate student council and program-based organizations.

Guidepost 3: Success (Tagumpay). This guidepost centers on academic-related concerns that the students need to face and overcome. The challenges include but are not limited to accessing online resources, navigating the LMS, being provided with advice on research topics and the like. The *Tagumpay* component of



the wellness program includes the GResO and the program coordinators in the formulation of ways and means to handle academic-related problems. This may cover providing research clinics, content-related workshops and webinars, and brown-bag discussions on various areas in the discipline.

Guidepost 4: Engagement (Pakikiisa). This guidepost encourages students and teachers to innovate and share their best practices in supporting one another. The goal of this component is to promote solidarity between and among teachers and students in CGSTER. The highlight of pakikiisa is the promotion of shared responsibility, and willingness to help others with difficulties. *Pakikiisa* is expected to enhance the goals of the graduate program which are to produce educational leaders, expert practitioners, and research scholars.

The CGSTER-Mental Wellness Framework (MWF) is designed to be a roadmap of guideposts to help students ease effectively through their academic journey. Based on the OSASS framework, the CGSTER-MWF highlights student welfare and development with the guideposts as the bases for the development of the activities that will be developed among the students.

Lastly, the wellness framework will be elaborated in the future. The committee reiterates that focus will be given on the wellness component of the framework and the involvement, success and engagement aspects may be the focus of other committees. Activities aligned with the framework are yet to be determined. Following the needs assessment, a focus group discussion with the concerned people in Program WISE will be undertaken to discuss the results. The process in identifying activities is perceived to be iterative by the committee.

To end, the following tasks were assigned to each committee member and further discussions on how the mental health of the graduate students will be promoted and safeguarded are planned. The committee recommended the following action plans:

1. The Deans of the Office of the Student Affairs and Student Services (OSASS) and the College of Graduate Studies and Teacher Education Research (CGSTER) should meet to address the synergy-related concerns between the two units.
2. The committee on CGSTER-MWF should be given access to the needs-assessment data available through the MIS so that graduate students will not have to answer a similar tool, thus saving time and effort.

Policy Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions

The process that the committee applied suggests the following policy recommendations for other higher education institutions with graduate programs when it comes to the development of mental wellness framework:

1. **The design of the framework should consider the contexts of both the implementers and target beneficiaries.** Framework designed to help students should be based on an extensive needs assessment. Moreover, there is a need to ensure that mental health professionals are available to implement the program and that they have the necessary competencies in implementing the programs and services developed from the framework.
2. **Activities supporting collaboration between units are highly encouraged.** The PNU Mental Wellness Framework was developed from iterative discussions on what mechanisms of support graduate students may need as they work for their degrees. Points of view coming from the students, faculty members and guidance counselors were considered and aligned against the programs suggested.
3. **An adequate number of personnel should be tapped to provide the support mechanisms to deliver the mental wellness framework.** Sensitivity to the assigned people's workload is suggested so that the counselors, faculty members, and students acting as peer support may deliver the required tasks. The assignment of multiple roles to a university staff may hinder the communication flow of delivering immediate help when needed.



4. **Synergy should be established in the formulation of services and activities.** Services and activities on mental wellness should be an articulation of the framework with the concerned offices discussing which areas of the framework are their responsibility. This action will control for redundancy in the development of activities for student welfare.

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