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The Philippine Normal University Bachelor of Science- Master of Arts in Psychology and Counseling Experience: Lessons Learned and Policy Recommendations

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**Consent was provided by the BSMA in Psychology Counseling students in the picture*

As the first ever straight program in the Philippine Normal University, the Bachelor of Science and Master of Arts in Psychology and Counseling (BSMA) aims to address the scarcity of competent mental health service providers in the Philippines. As a straight program, it integrates undergraduate and graduate courses into one hence, imparting to students the full capabilities needed to meet the demands of the psychology and counseling profession. This paper provides a critical review of the BSMA curriculum, and its research mentoring practices, highlighting its highs and lows. The major findings of the review include the need to: (1) strengthen student's research capabilities, (2) support licensure examination of students, (3) streamline learning outcomes, (4) further engage in academic and practice collaborations, (5) continuously evaluate the program with students leading to program enhancement. Challenges experienced by students were also attributed to emotional stress and the pandemic which affected their learning journey. These findings were later translated into policy recommendations targeted in (a) redesigning the curriculum to have a more articulate and clearer pathway from undergraduate to graduate curricula, (b) provision of a continuous bottom-up evaluation mechanism highlighting the feedback and outcomes of students, and (3) intensifying mentorship by exposing students to research at the start of their admission to the program to foster a culture of scholarship and inquiry. Successful implementation of these recommendations will be a testament to the program's commitment in providing highly competent mental health service providers ready to take on the present and future demands and challenges of the community that they serve.

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Introduction

The Bachelor of Science-Master of Arts in Psychology and Counseling (BSMA) Program at the Philippine Normal University was designed as a response to the need for guidance counselors in schools. As stated by the Department of Education, one guidance counselor must be present in every 500 pupils in public and private elementary and high schools (Senate Bill 379). Likewise, schools and communities also need psychologists to handle exceptional cases. Approved in 2013 and welcomed its first students in 2015, the straight program aims to provide a comprehensive education for students pursuing careers in psychology and counseling. Revisions to the curriculum were made to subscribe to the new higher education policies concerning graduates of Psychology and Counseling in both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Likewise, the revisions were made to be aligned with the assessment, intervention and program development needs of graduates who will become mental health professionals who exemplify the core values of the university. The competencies of the graduates have been designed to be responsive to the community and school needs and as recommended by the Philippine Regulation Commission. Currently the graduates of the program are serving as school counselors, psychological first aid responders, and psychologists in industries and communities. This policy brief outlines key recommendations for enhancing the curriculum based on the findings of two studies on the (1) curriculum review of the program, and (2) research mentoring done within the program.

Summary of the Two Studies

Curriculum Review Study

A mixed-method concurrent study was conducted to comprehensively review the BSMA curriculum by gathering qualitative and quantitative data from the students' and alumni's experiences and satisfaction with the curriculum. The key findings are as follows:

The BSMA Psychology and Counseling Program at the Philippine Normal University has succeeded in providing a curriculum that satisfies students, much more so in theoretical courses like Theories of Personality. This is also shared by another cluster, the alumni, who likewise appreciate the theoretical foundation that has helped them a great deal in making sense of the curriculum and its application in their professional lives.

However, both the students and the alumni raised the areas for improvement in research skills and licensure examination preparation. The curriculum, though rich in theoretical inputs,

may not adequately sharpen the students' research acumen crucial for their subsequent career pursuit and for accomplishing licensure exams, preconditions to professional practice in either the psychology or counseling field of endeavor.

Among these constraints of the program are: (1) Pedagogical barriers which include those related to the absence of the faculty and the lack of student work assessment/feedback; (2) Course barriers which are manifested in activities in the course not being relevant to address the competencies targeted on a particular course, or they do not make students develop practical skills for that matter; (3) Emotional barriers which capture the mental burden students have experienced due to the straight program series that is being too intensive; and (4) External barriers, such as the impact of the pandemic, which further sophisticates the learning environment through the production of compressed courses that emphasize the quantity of work over the quality of work.

Although satisfied, alumni expressed that there is some scope for better practical experience and relating it to industry relevance. They suggested internships, simulation exercises on counseling, and other hands-on experiences to better equip students in the realities of professional practice.

In other words, while the BSMA program has a functional theoretical framework and successful graduates who enter the licensure examination and professional practice, it seems wanting in terms of research capability and practice experience. Research capability facilitates knowledge for continuous learning and improvement while practice experience is the application of theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts to develop much needed skills and competence, which will truly make them ready for both licensure examination and professional practice.

Attention to identified barriers and consideration of alumni feedback in revising the curriculum were considered crucial to the continued success of the program. The feedback ensures insights into how well the program remains relevant in schools, industry, and community.

Evaluation of Research Mentoring Program

The purpose of this study on the research mentoring program evaluation within the BSMA Psychology and Counseling Program emerged after a realization from an initial curriculum review study: more was needed to understand in detail students' perceptions and experiences of this research mentorship program. This paper seeks to evaluate if the mentoring program



is to be effective in building up research competencies and skills among the students.

1. Key findings that emerged from the review indicated that students have a remarkably high belief in research and in its potential to influence and shape their educational and professional journey. They see it as an attribute of high value for which, therefore, they will try to derive value in their careers, hence developing a positive attitude towards the research efforts.
2. The mentorship program in and of itself may be considered one of the important strengths of the BSMA program. Students commend and appreciate the advice and new insights that their mentors offer in a way that really shapes their research abilities and knowledge. Specifically singled out as major factors for the success of the mentoring program are the availability of mentors and their commitment to train the students leading to publication of their research outputs.
3. The evaluation, however, also brought out areas for improvement. Research practices need improvement, just like further development in the mentoring experience. It focuses on developing the structure of the program, regularizing the consultation schedules, and exploring the feasibility of finding mentorship for individual students, which would make the process very personalized.

Such findings from the research mentoring program evaluation helped to delineate the strengths and weaknesses of the mentorship program enshrined in the BSMA curriculum. These findings are indeed crucial to guide the development process ahead and ensure that the program is sustained to prepare students to become psychologists and counselors.

Policy Recommendations

Several policy recommendations are proposed as enhancements for the BSMA psychology and counseling program based on findings from the BSMA curriculum review and augmenting research outcomes by mentoring.

On Curriculum Development:

1. The curriculum should be designed in a manner that will establish a seamless link from undergraduate to graduate studies by clearly articulating the learning

outcomes and competencies to be acquired at each level of study. Focus should be on core-practical experiences earlier in the curriculum, such as practicum, internship, clinical supervisions, assessment and diagnosis, facilitation of therapy sessions, counseling simulations and research projects which will allow students to apply theory and develop practical competencies.

2. Integrate active learning and critical thinking skills in both undergraduate and graduate levels. This translates to establishing means of communication among students, faculty, and administration for the purpose of curriculum planning and the timely resolution of student concerns. Integration of structured discussions on relevant topics should also be considered to articulate assumptions, identify issues, analyze, and consider multiple perspectives.
3. Recommend that institutions may review or consider having academic policies for BSMA different from the regular masters' program. Areas of differences may include policies on academic and co-curricular awards, publication requirements, etc., as stipulated in the CMO 15 S2019.

On Curriculum Evaluation:

1. Systematically evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum based on student feedback and analysis of student outcomes to ensure it remains relevant to the changing needs of the profession.
2. Assess how the curriculum aligns to professional licensure and national education goals which enable students to be prepared for their professional licensing exams and eventually to the world of work.
3. Assure adequate resources such as standardized tests, laboratory equipment, digital tools/applications in support of the curriculum.

Suggestions to Improve Student Experience and Delivery of Courses:

Student-Centered Learning:

1. Reframe assessment practices to place a priority on student feedback and ensure that divergence in the curriculum is reduced while there is optimization in students' experience of learning.
2. Provide early opportunities for students to engage in research that foster a culture of inquiry and scholarship.



Introducing a seamless research mentoring experience from undergraduate to graduate school e.g. one research mentor/thesis adviser.

3. Include practical experiences that bridge theoretical content to actual context and applications.

Faculty Development:

1. Provide regular training for the faculty to enhance their teaching as well as mentorship skills needed to assist the students' transition from undergraduate work to graduate work.
2. Encourage faculty to participate in relevant professional development programs that allows them to remain current in trends and best practices within higher education.
3. Infuse best practices from the field in the curriculum to ensure that students are exposed to updated knowledge and/or skill sets necessary for professional practice.
4. Foster a sense of community, which enables collaborative learning opportunities and mentoring by students and faculty.

It is recommended that curriculum developers extend the quality of education which eventually leads the BSMA program to steadily produce graduates who are comprehensively molded to meet challenges of the profession in psychology and counseling.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the BSMA program of the Philippine Normal University is a pioneering program that answers the huge void in mental health services for students enrolled in basic education. The integrated two-degree curriculum of the program attests that undergraduate and graduate levels are well represented since it has been able to provide a strong theoretical grounding among the students. It did highlight the enhancement of research capabilities and the preparation for the licensure examinations. Lessons that would need to be learned from this review are the importance of practical experiences, faculty development, and a supportive learning environment.

The following are being recommended as policy enhancements towards the BSMA: a curriculum revision for articulation which will promote a seamless educational process with delineation of learning outcomes and competencies at each level. An articulation that will strongly emphasize practical experiences though student internships and clinical supervisions will aid the students in applying general theoretical principles and developing appropriate competency areas for the respective

professional practices. The curriculum must further have inclusions of active learning and critical thinking for in-depth interaction with content. Regular assessment of the effectiveness of the curriculum will have to be done in relevance to student feedback and outcomes, alignment of the professional licensure requirements, and the national goals of education trends. Resources such as standardized examinations and digital tools should be provided to prepare the curriculum. The assessment practices should be refocused to maximize the value of student feedback and consequently maximize learning through it. A culture of inquiry and scholarship should be advocated for by exposing students to research early. It is also necessary to have practical experiences linked to theoretical contents for better understanding and deeper connection. Faculty development is also paramount. Faculty need proper training at adequate intervals to improve their teaching and mentorship skills, especially in facilitating the transition of students from undergraduate to postgraduate studies. Professional development of the faculty in accordance with modern trends and approaches in higher education must be provided for. All this is to set a favorable condition for a collaborative learning atmosphere and the opportunity for mentoring that will make a community of both students and teachers supportive of each other. If the program would adopt these recommendations, the BSMA program would ensure the response of the program to the changing needs of the profession and the communities being served by it. The graduates from the program would, therefore, better be able to handle the challenges in their profession, hence further enhancing service delivery in mental health within the Philippines.



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The PNU Educational Policy Research, and Development Office

The EPRDO is a specialized research center in the University focused on policy research and studies on teacher education. It is established to provide research-based policy recommendations to policy makers. It also serves as the clearing house for all data relevant to teacher education in the Philippines and beyond.

Vision

The Philippine Normal University through the EPRDO aims to be an innovation hub of teacher education research and educational policy studies.

Mission

To strengthen the culture of excellence in teacher education research and educational policy studies.

Objectives

The EPRDO shall manage the University's research production, enhance human resource capabilities, and share expertise to other Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs) in the area of teacher education research

Strategies

1. Establish and maintain a web-based university research portal that facilitates automated research management systems, and which also serves as the database of teacher education policies and teacher education research in the country and Southeast Asia.
2. Share research expertise and competence in teacher education research with other TEIs throughout the country;
3. Develop and disseminate the University research agenda
4. Design and implement the research capability program for faculty and staff;
5. Manage University's research production particularly the conduct of educational policy studies in education and teacher education; and
6. Serve as the implementing arm for research incentives and research ethics review.

Values

SYNERGY (Working collaboratively as a team)

EFFICIENCY (Delivering research services efficiently)

EXCELLENCE (Achieving high quality research outputs)

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