Role of Pre-University Program in the Integration of Cultural Minorities in Mindanao State University

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Abstract: *The Mindanao State University was established as one of the government's responses to the Mindanao Problem involving the peaceful coexistence of the Tri-people, the Muslims, Lumads and Christian settlers. Part of the mission of Mindanao State University is to attain peace and sustainable development in the MINSUPALA (Mindanao-Sulu-Palawan) region and facilitating the integration of the Tri-people into the national community. In line with this, the Pre-University Program (PUP) was implemented in MSU, GSC since 1996.Based on the assumption that many of the minority students are far behind the majority in terms of their preparation for collegiate programs, the PUP was created to bridge the gap between the two groups. The PUP provides the participants with the opportunity to be mentally, socially and emotionally equipped from one semester intensive training in the basic tool subjects such as English, Mathematics and Values Education, before moving to the regular degree programs of the University. This research aims to determine the extent to which the MSU Pre-University Program fulfills its mandate as an instrument of integration among the Tri-people in Mindanao. Furthermore, the researcher would like to unfold what characterize the essential experiences of integration of a PUP participant. The theoretical framework used in this study is Tinto's Model of Student Retention. The result of this research shows that the average survival rate of students from PUP to the completion of their respective courses is 19 %. The survival rate of PUP students is considerably low when compared to the rate of student withdrawal or attrition rate. The low survival rate can still be seen as an indicator of success (however small it may appear), since these PUP survivors were able to achieve the milestones of experiences that enabled them to integrate into the MSU Educational System. The experiences of the graduates who were former PUP students speak of successful integration and fruitful outcome. The impact of these of graduates upon their family, community and the Filipino society continues to grow and multiply with a ripple effect statistics cannot measure.*

Keywords: social integration, academic integration, tri-people, Pre-University Program, cultural minorities, institutional retention

1. Introduction

The Mindanao Problem

This study has, as its background, the second oldest and persisting conflict in human history, the Mindanao Problem. Mindanao is the second largest island of the Philippine archipelago, located at the Southern end of the Philippines, close to Indonesia and Malaysia. Mercado [6] relates that Muslim traders from today's Indonesia and Malaysia had contact with Mindanao long before the arrival of the Spaniards in the 16th century, and was responsible for the conversion to Islam of the inhabitants, and the formation of the Muslim Sultanates of Maguindanao and Sulu. Although Spain subdued the northern island of Luzon and most of the islands of the Visayas, converting most of the inhabitants to Catholicism, she never succeeded in subjugating Mindanao. Most of the islands were brought under central control with the arrival of the Americans at the turn of the 20th century, and after the end of the Philippine-American War, although sporadic hostility and conflict remained persisting for some five centuries.

Campo and Judd [4] discussed in detail how religious differences have partly shaped the Mindanao conflict but the roots of the conflict have been the clash of interests in land and other natural resources, and the identity issues emerging from the *de facto* second class status of much of the Muslim population. They also added that what complicates the picture is the presence of a number of non-Malay indigenous peoples collectively referred to as *Lumads* having historically been pushed aside in turn by Spanish and American colonizers, Christian settlers, and the Moros themselves. The *Lumads* were first displaced from the lowlands to the highlands, and today are viewed as inferior even by the Moros themselves.

With the increasing modernization and economic crisis, the Muslims and *Lumads* in Mindanao have lost a lot of their traditional means of survival and has inevitably been drawn to the undergrowth of the economic system that offers lucrative but dangerous and illegal sources of revenues. These include smuggling of guns, drug trafficking, piracies, kidnapping for ransom and the like. For those who are idealistic, the radical movements of political Islam have become the logical source of help and self-fulfillment to displaced Muslim youths.

A Government Response

From the perspective of the Philippine government, one solution to the Mindanao Problem is integration of the Muslims and *Lumads* into the mainstream of society through education. The Mindanao State University (MSU) was established as one of the government's responses to the Mindanao Problem.

The vision of the Mindanao State University System is to become a center of excellence in teacher education, science and technology, social sciences and humanities and agriculture and fisheries. Through this vision, it aims to contribute to urban and countryside development in an atmosphere of peace, unity and understanding among Christian, Muslims and *Lumads*.

Bridge Program of the MSU System

In line with the objective of accelerating the program of integration among the Tri-people of Southern Philippines, the Pre-University Program (PUP) of MSU was created under BOR Resolution No. 68, s. 1989 [7]. The objective of PUP is to be an instrument of the Mindanao State University system in reaching out to the educationally disadvantaged groups in southern Philippines in order to upgrade their academic performance and enable them to cope with college education. Based on the assumption that many of the

students from cultural minority groups are far behind the majority in terms of their preparation for collegiate programs, the PUP was created to bridge the gap between the two groups. The PUP provides the participants with the opportunity to be mentally, socially and emotionally equipped from one semester intensive training in the basic tool subjects such as English, Mathematics and in Values Education, before moving to the regular degree programs of the University.

The target beneficiaries of the Pre-University Program are the participants in the College Bound Program (CBP) who did not meet the prescribed passing Grade Point average (GPA) for the three CBP subjects, cultural minority students who have not participated in the CBP whose System Admission and Scholarship Examination (SASE) scores are below the seventy (70) cut-off score for the Muslims and Cultural Minorities and direct dependents (children, brothers and sisters) of MSU employees who did not pass the SASE.

During the First semester of the School Year 1996-1997, the PUP was formally started in MSU-Gen. Santos City with 300 students divided into 6 sections. The program was implemented until the School Year 2015-1016 and was temporarily stopped with the implementation of the K-12 Program nationwide. The Pre-University Program (PUP) was an intensive, non-credit training course for students who are not qualified to enroll in the different degree and technology programs of the University. It gives the participants the opportunity to be mentally, socially and attitudinally enhanced in preparation for college work.

The PUP was fully subsidized by the government with each participant paying only a miscellaneous fee of one hundred fifty pesos (PhP150.00) for five months. In effect, each PUP student was a beneficiary of a scholarship subsidy from the Filipino taxpayers. Since 1996, the MSU-GSC Pre-University Program had faithfully served the interests of the minority students by giving them a chance to enter the University through a one-semester remedial and enrichment program. Students coming from the minority groups comprise 31% of the whole student population and 33% of the freshmen population. Of the new enrollees who came from the minority, 24% are in the college proper while 9% belong to the PUP. However, the 9% is reduced after a one-semester cycle of the program because not all PUP students qualify to enter the different degree programs and some do not persist in their studies, and eventually drop out of the University. Their qualifying rate is one of the indicators if the PUP is really serving its purpose in helping these students enter college.

The success of each program cycle can only be determined after four or five years, the expected time of graduation of one batch. Hence, the evaluation of every cycle of the program should extend up to the projected year of graduation of the participants and beyond because a number of students overstay in the University. However, it is not enough to know that a participant has graduated. The experiences of academic and social integration which contributed to their success are equally important indicators of success of the PUP. This research attempted to evaluate the role and impact of the Pre-University Program. The researcher, being one of the teachers of Mathematics in the Pre-University Program since 2000, is interested in knowing whether the MSU-PUP is successful in fulfilling its mandate as an instrument of integration among the Tri-people in Mindanao. Being immersed into the program for the past twelve years, the researcher unfolded what characterized the essential experience of integration of a PUP participant. In line with this, the study focused on the Pre-University Program and what it has done to attain the integration among the Tri-people in Mindanao. Central to this study were the lived experiences of the PUP participants that contributed to the process of integration among them in the MSU educational system.

2. Research Elaborations

Theoretical Framework
This study was anchored on the theory of social integration which was introduced by Emile Durkheim, a French sociologist, in the late 19th century. Social integration is the means through which people interact, connect and validate each other within a community. The theory proposes that people experience mental, emotional and physical benefits when they believe they are a contributing, accepted part of a collective. Without that sense of connection, they can experience depression, isolation and physical illness that could limit them from experiencing productive, happy lives [3].

The most commonly referred to model in the student retention/dropout literature is Tinto's Model of Institutional Retention/Departure. It was first introduced in a literature review, and so began with the support of being broadly consistent with a considerable range of other people's research. This theory appeals to people's common sense because its central idea is integration. The theory claims that whether a student persists or drops out of school is strongly predicted by their degree of academic integration, and social integration. These evolve over time as integration and commitment interact. Tinto [2] defined academic integration as the "full range of individual experiences which occur in the formal and informal domains of the academic system of the university". He also referred to social integration as the formal and informal social interactions that students experience at the university.
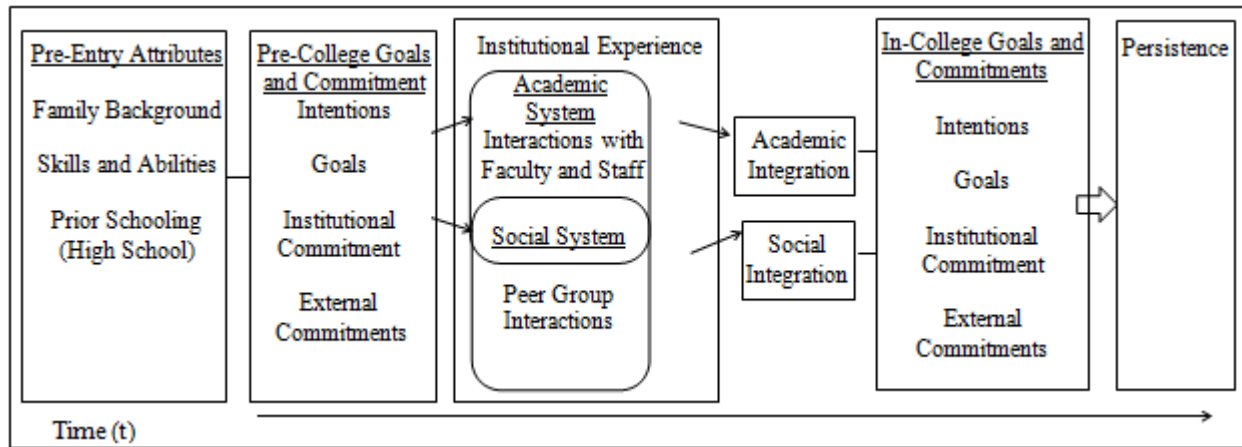
Figure 1: Tinto's Model of Institutional Retention/Departure (Tinto, 1987)

Tinto theorizes that students enter a college or university with a variety of patterns of personal, family and academic characteristics which he refers to as 'pre-entry attributes'. These attributes also include initial dispositions and intentions related to college attendance and personal goals. These intentions and commitments are subsequently modified and reformulated on a continuing basis through a series of interactions between the student and the structures and members of the academic and social systems of the Institution. This model presumes that rewarding encounters with formal and informal academic and social systems lead to greater student integration in these systems. Tinto postulated that the extent to which students are integrated into the academic and social domains of the university community influences their level of commitment, which in turn influences their persistence to finish their studies. In Tinto's model, commitment acts as the mediator between integration and retention [2].

Tinto's Model illustrates how interactions between the pre-entry attributes and experiences in the college environment influence a student's successful transition to college [1]. According to Tinto's theory [1] these pre-entry attributes influence commitments that students bring with them such as goal commitment and institutional commitment which students develop across their first semester or first year. Such commitments directly influence a student's decision to withdraw or to persist until graduation in college. Thus, according to Tinto [1], institutional commitment and goal commitment serve as both input variables that students bring in with them to college, and process variables that are affected by the student's experiences in college and which subsequently affect a student's decision to withdraw.

Tinto's theory of student retention has been the most widely cited theory for explaining the student departure process in the field of higher education. However, critics have argued the theory's failure to recognize cultural variables when applied to minority students [5]. Tinto, as cited by Guifridda[5] asserts that students need to "break away" from past associations and traditions to become integrated into the college's social and academic realms. Tierney (19920, as cited by Guifridda, [5] argued that this was potentially harmful to minority students because it encouraged their separation from cultural traditions and supportive relationships. Other critics have also contended that this aspect of Tinto's theory is rooted in western assimilation and enculturation paradigm and ignores bicultural integration or the ability of minority students to succeed at college while being a part of both the minority and the majority cultures [5].

Since substantial research has validated the need for minority college students to retain and nurture connections to their cultural heritage, and to draw support from members of their home communities, then there is a need for a cultural advancement of the Tinto's Theory. Braxton et al [5] suggest for an elaboration of the Tinto's Theory and the integration of psychological and cross-cultural perspectives to enhance the theory especially as it applies to minority students.

Conceptual Framework
Based on the discussion of the theoretical background of this study, which is the theory of social integration, the researcher designed a Conceptual Framework shown in Figure 2. The framework served as a blueprint in the conduct of the study.
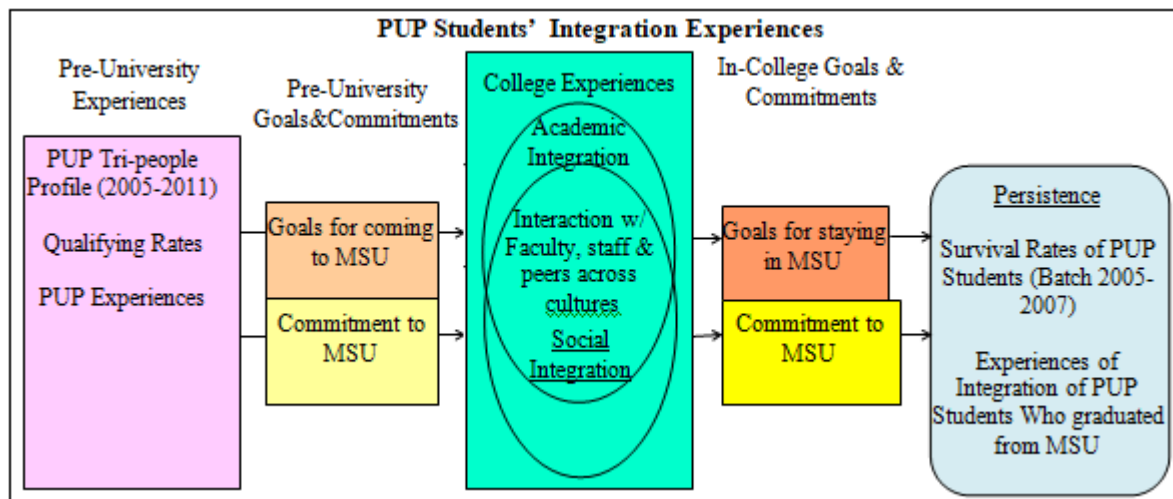
Figure 2: Schematic Presentation of the Conceptual Framework

The Conceptual Framework which was adapted from Tinto's Model (Figure 1) shows a clear picture of the relationships between and among the different variables in this study.

The variables of the study are the PUP Tri-people profiles, the qualifying rates from PUP to a degree or diploma program, survival rates to a degree program, the PUP students' and graduates' experiences of integration and the PUP teachers' observations of these experiences in the program. These variables were the bases for unfolding the essential experiences of academic and social integration of former PUP students.

The PUP Tri-people profiles served as background information in this study to establish the need to conduct an assessment of the integration experiences of the PUP students and graduates.

The Conceptual Framework differs from Tinto's Model (Figure 1) in that the pre-entry attributes of the students were not included because these are not within the scope of the study. Instead, the Conceptual Framework includes the Pre-university experiences of the students within the PUP. The integration experiences are classified into academic integration and social integration.

Another difference between the Conceptual Framework of this study and that of Tinto's Model is the relationship between the two sets of institutional/college experiences. While Tinto's Model (Figure 1) separates the two sets of integration experiences, the Conceptual Framework (Figure 2) shows the intersection of academic and social integration experiences. This intersection takes place during the students' interactions with faculty, staff and peers across cultures. This intersection incorporates Williamson-Ashey's[9] and Tucker's [8] argument on the mutual interdependence of the two sets of experiences. It also recognizes the cross cultural dimension of these integration experiences.

Pre-college goals and commitments were incorporated in the framework since they define the initial intentions and reasons of the PUP students in coming to MSU. These goals and commitments are subsequently shaped, and transformed through their interactions within the social and academic

systems of MSU. As Tinto suggests, the extent of students' experiences of integration into the academic and social domains of the university community influences their level of commitment, which in turn influences their persistence to finish their studies [2].

The persistence of the students to finish their degree since entry to the PUP program is indicated by the survival rates of the students from PUP to degree programs or diploma courses, enrolment rate from PUP to degree programs or diploma courses, and survival rates of PUP students until graduation.

Statement of the Problem
This research determined the extent to which the MSU Pre-University Program fulfilled its mandate as an instrument of integration among the tri-people in Mindanao. Furthermore, this research had unfolded the essential experiences of integration of the PUP participants.

The specific questions which were answered in this study are the following:
1) What is the survival rate of students from PUP to:
1.1 Academic Program; and
1.2 Completion of a degree/diploma program?
2) What were the significant experiences of PUP students that contributed to the achievement of academic and social integration?

Scope and Delimitation of the Study
The locale of the study is MSU-General Santos City. The respondents of this study were the PUP teachers, teachers of former PUP students, and former PUP participants. The scope of program evaluation is from School Year 2005-2006 to School Year 2011-2012. The data for the whole population of each batch were taken to evaluate the qualifying rate of PUP students to college proper. PUP participants who graduated from 2008-2012 were accounted for the completion rate of PUP students in different degree programs.

Methodology
This study applied the descriptive research methodology. The quantitative data on survival rates used in this study were accessed from the MSU Electronic School

Management System (ESMS). The qualitative data were extracted from individual in-depth interviews, focus group discussions of PUP participants, graduates and teachers, and from field observation. The variables of the study are the Qualifying Rate of PUP Students (Batches 2005-2011), Survival Rate of PUP Students (Batches 2005-2007), Experiences of PUP Participants Related to Academic and Social Integration.

3. Results and Findings

The following are the significant findings of this study:

1. The average survival rate of students from PUP to the completion of their respective courses is very low at 19%. On the other hand, the average survival rate of PUP students from admission in college to the completion of their respective courses is also low at 27%. A persistence rate of 19% from PUP to graduation implies that the level of achievement of integration to the MSU educational system of former PUP students is also very low. However small it may appear, the survival rate of 19 % can still be seen as a measure of success since these PUP survivors were able to achieve the milestones of experiences that enabled them to integrate into the MSU Educational System. From the interviews conducted, the most common reasons why some PUP students drop out from MSU-GSC are: 1) Lack of financial support, 2) Lack of commitment to the goal of finishing a degree, 3) Low level of student preparation for college work or poor academic background, 4) Lack of motivation from the family, 5) Personal and family problems, 5) Transfer to other schools.

2. There are significant experiences of PUP students within the five month duration of the PUP, and throughout their stay in college which contributed to their academic and social integration. These experiences were classified as challenges and milestones because not all experiences are positive ones. Even the setbacks or negative experiences served as challenges which later became stepping stones for them to achieve their goals.

The major challenges in Remedial Mathematics (Math. A) are negative attitudes towards Mathematics and poor academic background. However, their experiences in Mathematics A provided them with a good foundation for college Mathematics which opened their minds to understand basic Algebra. Around 80 -90 % of the PUP participants pass in Mathematics A.

The challenges in English A are poor academic background of students, lack of practice and lack of self-confidence. In spite of these setbacks, the PUP students' achieved some milestones in English A. They learned to construct correct English sentences and developed the confidence to speak in English. About 98 % of the PUP students pass English A.

In the tutorial sessions conducted by volunteers from an NGO, less than 50 % attended regularly. Many PUP students did not take it seriously. However, the milestones are very encouraging: 1) PUP students developed problem solving skills; 2) They developed communication skills; 3) There were more interactions and group activities. The presence of

the NGO tutorial sessions was cited as one of the strengths of the program although the tutorial classes are not officially a part of the PUP. During college, the former PUP students affirmed their experiences of academic integration in spite of the challenges they had to overcome. Their challenges in college are learning difficulties, discrimination, and poverty. The milestones they experienced in college include the following: 1) They enjoyed their courses; 2) The students thrived best in colleges providing affirmative learning experiences; 3) They hurdled financial problems, and; 4) They overcame discrimination.

3. Significant experiences of PUP Students which contributed to the achievement of social integration transpired during Values Education classes, tutorial classes and during the PUP Day Program. In college, their participation in college activities and intramurals and their membership in different student organizations contributed much to the achievement of social integration. The major challenges they had to overcome were their limited social exposure, cultural and religious prejudices and discrimination. The milestones PUP students achieved in the area of social integration as follows: 1) They overcame religious and cultural prejudices; 2) They overcame discrimination; 3) They developed positive character traits, and; 4) They developed understanding, peace and unity among the Tri-people.

4. From the PUP students' significant experiences which have contributed to the achievement of academic and social integration, corresponding themes or meanings surfaced. The meanings that emerged under the experiences of academic integration of former PUP students are: 1) Academic empowerment through quality education; 2) Satisfaction with the extent of one's personal and intellectual development; 3) Experiences of concern from faculty and staff for their academic and intellectual development; 4) Commitment to the goal of finishing one's course, and; 5) Trust in the capacity of the institution to provide quality education. The meanings that emerged under the experiences of social integration of former PUP students are: 1) Satisfying peer group interactions; 2) Development of friendships with other students across cultures; 3) Satisfying interactions with faculty members outside of the classroom; 4) Institutional commitment to the university; 5) Overcoming discrimination and taking pride in being a PUP participant, and; 6) Fulfilment of personal goals.

4. Conclusions

The findings of this study led to the following conclusions:
1) There is greater attrition than persistence among the program participants. Most of the factors which contributed to the high attrition rate of former PUP students are not institutional factors. These factors are related to the background variables and environment of the students.
2) The five-month PUP training contributed significantly to the PUP students' experiences of academic integration in MSU. Even the NGO Tutorial Program, which is not officially a part of the PUP, has significantly contributed to the integration process. In college, the students who persisted in their studies claimed that they were able to

enjoy their courses, hurdle financial difficulties, and overcome discrimination because they were privileged to attend the PUP, a bridge program that increased their level of preparation for college work. The affirmative learning experiences provided in their colleges enabled them to enjoy their courses and persist in their studies. From the experiences of PUP students who persisted until graduation, it can be concluded that the objective of the University to reach out to the educationally disadvantaged minority groups in Mindanao is being fulfilled by the PUP.

3) In terms of social integration, the PUP was instrumental in bringing together the Tri-people in an academic/social environment where cultural and religious barriers can be broken down. The Values Education classes had been particularly helpful in enabling the students to overcome their cultural and religious prejudices and develop positive character traits. Most of the respondents did not experience integration problems after they were absorbed by the different colleges. Based on the PUP participants' experiences of social integration, the PUP had successfully promoted peace and unity among the Tri-people, thereby accelerating the government's program of integration among the Tri-people of Southern Philippines.

4) Academic integrationis the degree to which students have developed intellectually as a result of college attendance and interaction with peers, faculty and staff of the institution. The meanings that emerged under the experiences of academic integration of former PUP students showed that these students have developed intellectually since they have experienced academic empowerment through holistic quality education. The outcomes of academic integration are commitment to the goal of finishing a degree and commitment to the university and eventually, persistence until graduation.Overcoming discrimination and taking pride in being a PUP participant are convincing indicators that the respondents have developed a sense of belonging to the social system of the University. Fulfilment of personal goals is just a by-product of their becoming academically and socially integrated.

From the findings of this research, it can be concluded that academic and social integration of PUP participants are parts of the same phenomenon and cannot be distinguished in actual experience. The meanings they derived from these experiences share common grounds like satisfying interactions with faculty members, institutional commitment and fulfillment of personal goals. It is worth noting that institutional commitment among former PUP students who persisted until graduation is very strong. Their gratefulness for the opportunity which the University afforded them was constantly expressed in the interviews conducted. They also unanimously expressed a sense of pride in being MSU'ans.

5. Acknowledgement

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