





**From Centers to Hubs:  
Reconceptualizing UPOU Learning Centers**

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Editors: Melinda F. Lumanta and Joane V. Serrano



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Published in the Philippines by University of the Philippines Open University

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ISBN: 978-971-767-216-8

First printing, 2017

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Printed in the Philippines

# Foreword

The establishment of the Learning Centers as part of the UP Open University's operations was one of the outcomes of the University's linkage with the UK Open University (UKOU) and our exposure to how the latter managed and implemented its distance education programs.

While the early model of the UP Open University's Learning Center may have been patterned after those of UKOU, the UP Open University introduced some changes and made adjustments befitting the local concept of an open university's Learning Center as well as the various roles that it will play, foremost of which is to provide a support system to learners. Most of these changes transpired as a consequence of revolutionizing instructional content delivery; they were vital to the delivery of quality distance education using modern information and communication technology (ICT). Some changes, however, emerged because the University had to seize opportunities to provide other services to the community. Each Learning Center therefore acquired a unique identity relevant to the local context where it operated, even as it retained the collective attributes of the early model.

The Learning Centers' transformation from being the University's "physical presence" in a geographical area to becoming Testing Centers was a natural progression that seamlessly paralleled with delivering instructional content completely online. Again, the UP Open University's Learning Centers found themselves at a crossroads - opportunities abounded as a result of the open education movement which the University fully embraced because it was aligned with its public service function.

At every crossroads, it is apropos to prompt an introspection – to reflect on the essence of our existence and of our journey to the place where we find ourselves now. This book will provide us with various perspectives through the narratives of those who have been part of the journey of the UP Open University's Learning Centers, the Learning Center Coordinators.

They were the drivers of the transformation and, in many cases, when they needed to respond to unanticipated situations, the navigators.

I congratulate Dr. Melinda F. Lumanta, Dr. Joane V. Serrano, the staff of the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, and the chapter authors for making this book a reality. It will not only codify our experiences as lived by the various actors involved in the operation of our Learning Centers but also serve as a guide to other higher education institutions that are finding themselves in a situation where we were more than 20 years ago. We will be to them what UKOU was to us. We hope that the insights that the higher education institutions will get from this book will contribute to the further enrichment of Open and Distance eLearning theory and practice.

**Melinda dP. Bandalaria, PhD**

Chancellor

2016

# Preface

Like most open universities, the University of the Philippines Open University (UP Open University), established in 1995, adopted an organizational set-up that addressed student support services through a defined network of Learning Centers to deliver its services. Hence, in its more than 20 years of existence, the UP Open University maintained a geographically-based system of Learning Centers in the country; and recently set up a Learning Center that caters to offshore students. With changes in the UP Open University's philosophical and paradigmatic stance along with its structural and operational adaptations and with advances in technology, the Learning Centers, as both academic and administrative support units, also evolved through the years.

This volume captures the collective experience of the Learning Centers as seen through the lenses of its Coordinators. The Learning Center, being an integral institutional link between the University and its distance learners, is considered as an all-important academic and administrative unit of the UP Open University in the delivery of quality education. With the end in view of continuously assessing their relevance and responsiveness to an ever-evolving education environment, it is hoped that this compilation of narratives becomes a starting point for reflection towards reconceptualizing the UP Open University's Learning Center set-up.

The UP Open University experience is revealed through first-person accounts of the current Learning Center Coordinators as they talk about their lived experiences in their assigned Learning Centers and as they tackle shared issues that define the UP Open University's Learning Center system. A historical perspective introduces the individual narratives and a culminating chapter presents a collective vision towards reconceptualizing the Learning Center concept from centers to hubs.

The first narrative highlights the beginnings of the UP Open University as it shared space in UP campuses for its Learning Centers. It was a struggle

to establish its identity as it was always seen to be under the wings of the campus where it was located - a carry-over from the former School of Distance Education (SDE) set-up.

In the second narrative, the role of the Learning Center Coordinators is explained vis-a-vis the changes in organizational structure. The UP Open University went through a major reorganization from geographic-based Schools of Distance Education to discipline-based Faculty Offices and along with it changes in the role of the Learning Centers. The effect of technological advances on the UP Open University's student support services is captured in the third narrative as it discussed the five generations of open and distance learning.

Student support services is at the core of operations of the Learning Centers. The fourth and fifth narratives give a glimpse of how the Learning Center Coordinators dealt with students who considered them as their ever present point of contact with the University. On the University side, the Learning Center is considered as its physical presence in the area or region where it is located. The next two narratives highlight the investments and efforts put in by the University in making sure its programs and services are indeed accessible to its various stakeholders.

And with the UP Open University going online in 2007, a new configuration of a Learning Center had to be created. The Virtual Learning Center is unique in a sense that all of its transactions and procedures are mostly conducted and communicated online. The eighth narrative captures how the Virtual Learning Center was conceptualized and how its coordinator employs unique strategies when it comes to dealing with students and agencies overseas.

**Melinda F. Lumanta, PhD**  
**Joane Serrano, PhD**  
Editors

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# Learning Centers: Contexts and Beginnings

By Joane V. Serrano<sup>1</sup>, Alvie Simonette Q. Alip<sup>2</sup>,  
Yasele Irene Angela M. Yambao<sup>3</sup>,  
and Margaret J. Suarez<sup>4</sup>

We are living in a period of unprecedented technological growth and advancements. Our society is characterized by globalization, increased access to information and knowledge, collaboration through social networking platforms, instantaneous communication, and sharing of resources among communities of practice. Because of these advancements along with educational initiatives and innovations, we believe it is essential to look back at the beginnings of the instructional delivery of the University of the Philippines Open University (UP Open University) and understand the contexts for the establishment of Learning Centers.

When UP Open University was established in 1995 to address the demand for quality higher education especially in areas which are not reached by a University of the Philippines (UP) campus, the available technology and tools were relatively unsophisticated compared to what UP Open University is currently using. Then there were no synchronous online communication and instant messaging so UP Open University relied on the more traditional telephone, fax machine or express mail delivery when sending information and materials to its students. In those days, the cost of long distance calls and airfares were astronomical. Yet despite those challenges, UP Open University was able to create a niche for itself by reaching out to qualified Filipinos who wanted to pursue further studies but could not be reached by the residential constituent units of UP because of geographical distance and their limited resources.

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1 Director, Information Office and Multimedia Center, UP Open University

2 University Researcher IV, UP Open University

3 University Research Associate II, UP Open University

4 University Researcher I, UP Open University

According to the first Chancellor, Dr. Ma. Cristina D. Padolina, UP Open University was envisioned to reach as many Filipinos as possible so that they could contribute to the development of human capital of the country.

Established on 23 February 1995, UP Open University became the fifth autonomous unit of the UP System. UP Open University seeks to provide broader access to quality higher education, adhere to the highest standards of academic excellence and encourage social responsibility and nationalistic commitment among its faculty, staff and students.

Specifically, UP Open University aims:

- To provide opportunities for alternative access to quality higher education by offering degree programs and non-formal courses by distance education;
- To develop a system of continuing education to sustain professional growth and improve technical skills especially for those who cannot leave their jobs or home for full-time studies; and
- To contribute toward upgrading the quality of the educational system of the country.

## **Delivering Instruction and Providing Student Support Services through Learning Centers**

Study Centers were put up to address the learning needs of UP Open University's students. The University firmly believes that student support services, a very important component of distance education, should be readily available to its students. During the early years of UP Open University, various support services were provided mainly through the Study Centers. UP Open University started with nine (9) Study Centers strategically located all over the country: six in Luzon, two in Visayas and one in Mindanao. This number grew over the years but eventually was streamlined as a consequence of the changing nature of technology used in instructional delivery.

One of the offices that was initially established was the Office of the Student Support Services (OSSS) which, at first, was placed under the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs (OVCAA). However, the unique and complex need for student support services led to the establishment of an office that focused mainly on student support. Hence

in April 1996, the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Student Support Services (OVCSSS) was formally established. The OVCSSS was responsible for organizing student support services which included student registration and management of the Learning Centers for an effective system of delivery of instruction. Two offices were created under the OVCSSS: the Office of the University Registrar (OUR) and the Office of Student Administration (OSA).

The functions of OVCSSS included planning, proposing, and implementing policies pertinent to student services in support of delivery of instruction to the distance learners; coordinating the registration of students and the delivery of learning packages; operating the Learning Centers (LC) with a system of tutorials, counseling, and assessment; conducting training programs and orientation sessions; and establishing linkages with institutions/officials in and around the Learning Centers.

With the establishment of a formal office to take care of student support services, Study Centers were renamed as Learning Centers to reflect a broader and wider range of services. The Learning Center was a place where students came to avail themselves of UP Open University services, both administrative and academic such as registration, procurement of instructional materials, and attendance to the once-a-month study sessions facilitated by trained tutors of UP Open University. Learning Centers were located in UP campuses and in other reputable institutions of higher learning found in provincial areas where students can have easy access to libraries, instructional facilities, and qualified faculty members. Specifically, the Learning Centers received applications to curricular programs; registered students; conducted orientation sessions for new students; distributed learning modules; served as venue for the tutorials or study sessions and for face-to-face laboratory courses; offered guidance and counselling services to the students; facilitated administrative processes related to the academic needs of the students; and served as linkage between students and staff of UP Open University and other UP offices.

A number of factors were considered by OVCSSS in establishing Learning Centers. One of them was the strategic location in terms of the geographical and political regions and proximity to other Learning Centers. The area should also be accessible to students and must have a large number of prospective clientele for a number of distance education programs. There should also be higher education institutions (HEIs) or

other agencies with good standing and reputation in the local community that were willing to host Learning Centers and provide physical facilities such as classrooms and laboratory rooms; qualified staff to serve as LC Coordinators; and qualified academics or practitioners from local agencies and institutions to serve as study tutors. Communication facilities (e.g. telephone lines), fast delivery service, network linkages in the area and special program requirements to support distance education program(s) should also be available. Lastly, peace and order situation in the area was evaluated.

In order for a Learning Center to operate, a number of requirements were also considered. The first requirement was a signed Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the UP Open University and the host institution. There should also be a minimum of 30 admitted applicants per program. A LC Coordinator must have been appointed and trained by the UP Open University; appointments during the early years was on a yearly basis. Another requirement was for the Learning Center to have qualified study tutors who have been identified and trained by the UP Open University. A budget must have been determined and issued in accordance with the date of effectivity stipulated in the MOA.

Figure 1 shows the student support services framework provided by the UP Open University then. From Simpson's (2000) simplest model of straight transfer of material between institution and students similar to a chemical reaction, a second element represented by the student support activities entered the equation – one that envisaged a "catalytically assisted reaction." The student support activities from admission to graduation including the delivery of instruction were lodged in the Learning Centers. Learning Centers served as the main contact between the UP Open University and the cooperating institutions. The LC Coordinators and tutors liaised with the general public in promoting the distance education programs of the UP Open University. The LC Coordinators organized the necessary physical facilities, such as study session rooms or laboratory rooms.

They implemented instructions received from the OVCSSS regarding assignment of tutors to courses. They served as counsellors to both the distance learners and the tutors. They distributed the learning materials to the students through the tutors. They guarded against leakage of examination questions. They collected the marked assignments from the tutors, photocopied assignments using random sampling, and sent

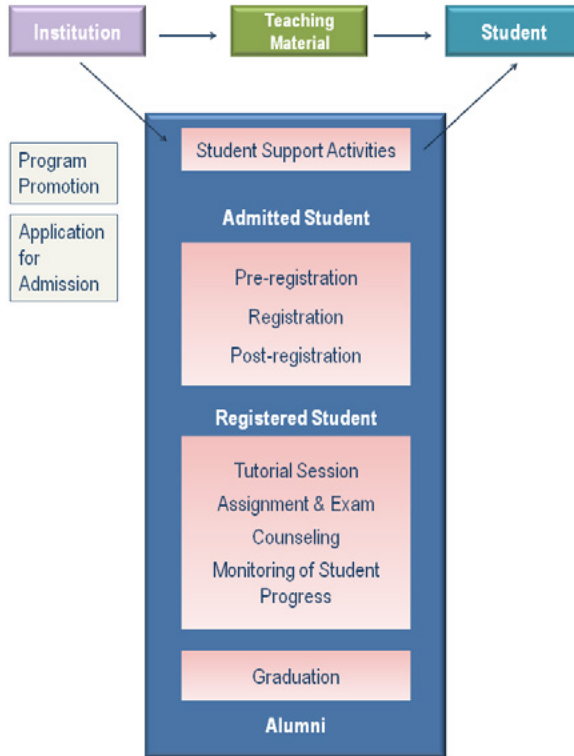


Figure 1. Student Support Services Framework

these samples back to the OVCSSS by fast post not later than the second Monday after the submission by the students. They sent back to the OVCSSS the examination answers of the students and the questions by Monday immediately after the study session when the examination was given. They looked after the budgetary matters, particularly disbursement of Personnel Services and Maintenance and Other Operating Expenses following government procedures on accounting and auditing. They managed and maintained the equipment of UP Open University which may be assigned to the Learning Center for use by the students and distance education staff. They looked after the library materials sent by UP Open University and made them available for use by the students and tutors. They attended conferences, meetings and seminars organized by UP Open University. They facilitated attendance of tutors at seminar-workshops organized by UP Open University for their benefit. Lastly, they attended to other matters affecting the distance education programs offered at the Learning Center.

When UP Open University underwent the first reorganization in 1999, one of the changes that had an effect on the delivery of student support services through the Learning Centers was the expansion of the Office of Academic Support and Instructional Services (OASIS). Part of the expansion was the creation of the Online Teaching and Learning Laboratory (ONTELL). The main goal of this office was to develop, implement and deliver UP Open University programs through the Internet. At that time UP Open University considered the Internet as another medium of instruction, on the same level as printed media. The office assisted the OVCSSS in the delivery of courses online. The office designed a new learning support model using the Internet. This change had an effect on the role of the Learning Center in the delivery of instruction specifically the support they were giving the students as well.

In 2004, when UP Open University offered online tutoring, the need for support to students to adapt to online tutoring presented additional tasks to the LC Coordinators. The functions were still carried with the exception of supervision of tutors in the Learning Centers. Due to the absence of local tutors, the LC Coordinators had to: supervise most activities related to the courses enrolled by the students, such as video showing and public speaking; receive TMAs from students; supervise the administration and proctoring of examinations; assist students in using the computer; familiarize themselves with IVLE; and, sometimes, get an Internet account.

In the same year, there was a second reorganization. The OVCSSS was abolished and the Learning Centers were administratively supervised under the OVCAA. Learning Centers still performed some part of the delivery system for student services and carried out its functions and services in close coordination with the different offices such as the Office of the University Registrar and Office of Academic Support and Instructional Services and Faculty Offices.

Figure 2 shows the history of Learning Centers. From 10 Learning Centers in 1996, three more Learning Centers were added. Beginning 2005, some Learning Centers were reinvented to perform the role of Testing Centers. In 2007, the Virtual Learning Center (VLC) - Local was established. However, with the changes in the Learning Center set-up in 2010, the VLC-Local was abolished, and the Learning Centers in the Region were assigned to handle the Testing Centers. In 2011, the VLC-Abroad was created, and since then, with the MOA with DFA, the Philippine Embassies

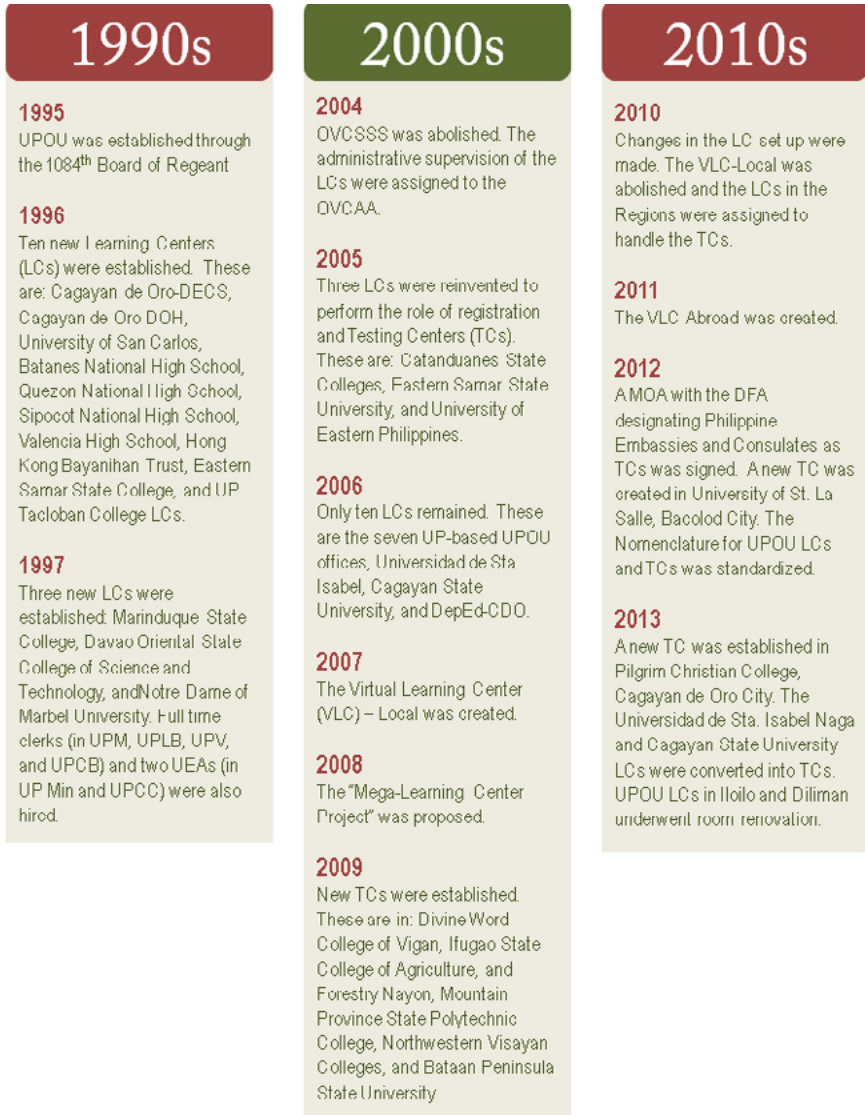


Figure 2. History of the Learning Centers of UP Open University

and Consulates served as Testing Centers for the UP Open University.

With these major changes accompanied with recent changes and breakthroughs in information and communication technology, the UP Open University had to rethink some of its services including the roles of the Learning Centers in the delivery of support to the students. It is

hoped that through a compilation of narratives of the LC Coordinators, this volume will capture how the Learning Centers continuously responded to an ever-evolving education environment and how the UP Open University's Learning Center set up can be reconceptualized.

# Establishing the Learning Center Identity

By Elvira R. Lalap<sup>1</sup>

I am Elvira Lalap, Coordinator for the LC Headquarters in Los Baños. In this narrative, I would like to discuss the humble beginnings of the UP Open University and to highlight the efforts of the LC Headquarters to make the University known to the community.

When the UP Open University started in 1995, it was physically present in four major autonomous units of the UP System through its Schools for Distance Education (SDE), each one headed by a Dean: SDE Diliman, SDE Manila, SDE Iloilo, and SDE Los Baños. Having different SDEs located in various UP campuses seemed beneficial to the UP Open University at the time as it enabled the University to broaden its scope when it came to its students and faculty members. However, such a setup also gave rise to a number of concerns such as the varied disciplines of the faculty members within each SDE and the public's lack of knowledge about the UP Open University.

## The Learning Center Headquarters

By the year 1998, the UP Open University had twenty eight (28) Learning Centers under OSSS<sup>2</sup> that were stationed in different provinces across the country (see Appendix 1). The LC Headquarters, known at the time as the UPOU Learning Center at UP Los Baños, was located in the Department of Humanities building in UP Los Baños. It shared space with three other faculty members in the Department and had Prof. Dulcinea Laforteza, a full time faculty member of the Department, as its first coordinator (see Appendix 2). I, on the other hand, was an assistant to Prof. Laforteza and

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<sup>1</sup> Coordinator, LC Los Baños

<sup>2</sup> Office of the Student Support Services

helped in the operations and administrative matters at the Learning Center.

The LC Headquarters then was near the SDE Los Baños and the UP Open University main office in UP Los Baños. When we first started performing the tasks in the Learning Center, some of the SDE and OSSS staff helped us in conducting the major activities of the Learning Center, such as registration, distribution of materials, programs, and general orientation. By the year 1997, the LC Headquarters was transferred to a bigger room in the Department of Humanities. Even though Prof. Laforteza and I still shared the room with two other faculty members of the Department, it was nevertheless big enough to accommodate the Learning Center and its equipment.

Gradually, Prof. Laforteza and I took over all of the activities of the Learning Center. In my opinion, that was the time when the Learning Center actually became a place where students came to relay their academic, administrative, and even personal concerns. Face-to-face study sessions were conducted monthly in five different venues in UP Los Baños. Students used the office as venue for small group discussions, meetings, and other academic-related matters, utilizing the resources (i.e. book references, computer units, and Internet connection) of the university.

In the years 1997 through 2002, the role of the Learning Centers when it came to the operations of the UP Open University became more significant. In those years, the Learning Centers became the focal point for students' academic concerns. In the LC Headquarters itself, there were around five to ten students visiting the Learning Center daily to participate in small group discussions, meetings, and other academic-related matters.

## **Change of Location and Name**

In the year 2000, the UP Open University moved to its new and permanent home, near the boundary of Los Baños and Bay. The building, up until now, serves as the university's headquarters and houses the main offices of the university. Having its own building helped the UP Open University establish its identity separate from the other UP campuses such as UP Los Baños.



UP Open University Headquarters in Los Baños, Laguna

While the main offices were relocated to the new building, the LC Headquarters remained in UP Los Baños for another three years. In 2001 to 2004, Dr. Joane Serrano became the new coordinator for the LC Headquarters. With me as her assistant, we continued to run and operate the Learning Center at the Student Union building in UP Los Baños until we moved to the new building in 2003. That was also the time when the UPOU Learning Center at UP Los Baños was renamed the UPOU Learning Center at Headquarters. The change in name was the University's move to make it clear to the Los Baños community that the UP Open University was an individual institution independent from UP Los Baños.

### **Promotional Efforts**

Despite the fact that the UP Open University had gradually established its own identity and place where students could go to and avail themselves of its services, the UP Open University Headquarters was still sometimes confused with the UP Los Baños campus because both universities are located in the town of Los Baños. There were still instances when new students and applicants were directed to the UP Los Baños campus, but thanks to the UP Los Baños staff, students were given directions on how to reach the UP Open University headquarters.

This was also one of the reasons why the LC Headquarters initiated activities and projects that aimed to promote UP Open University to the community. Publications such as newsletters and brochures were produced by the University and were distributed to the staff, students, visitors, and nearby communities. These materials featured what the UP Open University is about and how it is different from other UP campuses when it came to its mode of course delivery.

In 2004, I was appointed as the LC Coordinator. I only made few adjustments to my new position since I was already used to the everyday operations in the Learning Center. However, by the year 2007, the UP Open University underwent major changes when it came to its mode of course delivery. The university started exploring online platforms particularly IVLE, MyPortal, and MOODLE. The operations in the Learning Centers gradually changed as the face-to-face tutorial sessions were abolished and a number of student support services such as enrolment, registration, applications, and even classes were conducted online.



Dr. Primo Garcia talking in front of high school students  
in Los Baños National High School

With these changes in the Learning Centers, I got the chance to further involve myself in the promotional efforts of the University such as visiting different private and public schools in Los Baños and nearby communities. The University conducted orientations among high school students, particularly those from the graduating classes. In these orientations, we discussed with the students an alternative way of studying: studying through distance mode.

### **Further Opening the UPOU Gate**

With the various efforts done by the university, UPOU has slowly made itself known to nearby communities. Now that the Internet culture has become part of people's everyday lives, the UP Open University is using this as an opportunity to broaden its reach as it is now making its services and operations fully online. With this, the role of the Learning Centers will again be changing and I can see that the UP Open University and the Learning Centers will be at the forefront when it comes to the use of advanced technology. This will be a great opportunity for the University and the Learning Centers to further open its gates to every Filipino and extend its reach even to the most marginalized communities.



# Reorganization and the Changing Roles of the Learning Centers

By Geneva T. Simplina<sup>1</sup>

I am Geneva Simplina, Coordinator in LC Baguio, and I would like to share with you my knowledge on the everyday operations in the Learning Centers and how these have changed within a span of two decades.

I have been with the UP Open University for 15 years and counting, and I have witnessed how the Learning Centers have evolved to what they are now. Ever since the University was established, the Learning Centers have managed to adapt to the changes implemented by the institution. Through the years, the Learning Centers have changed in terms of location, roles of coordinators, approach to prospective applicants, conduct of orientation, enrolment, distribution of modules, program offerings, tutorials, testing centers, and examinations.

## Location

The LC Baguio is located in the UP Baguio (formerly UP College Baguio or UPCB) campus on Governor Pack Road, Baguio City. The Learning Center, originally situated at the main building of UP Baguio in 1995, was very accessible as it was just near the Registrar's office. However, the space was quite small; hence, in 1999, three of the computer units of the Learning Center were stationed temporarily in the Cordillera Studies Center (CSC) in UP Baguio.

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<sup>1</sup> Coordinator, LC Baguio

In 2002, the Learning Center was transferred to another building because the main building was renovated. The new location was in one of the classrooms occupied by the CSC. We shared the classroom, again for lack of space, with some of the researchers of CSC. We used an improvised divider as our demarcation line. The Learning Center was located there until December 2005.

Before the relocation in January 2006, Prof. Leticia Tolentino, the then LC Coordinator for Baguio (see Appendix 2), was assured of a space reserved for the LC Baguio once the new building of CSC is ready for occupancy. We were transferred to the newly constructed building, now called the CSS-CSC Complex, in July 2007. The Learning Center is the first to be seen upon entrance to the building through the back gate of UP Baguio. It is very spacious and well-ventilated. At the start, those who saw it remarked that it looked like a huge aquarium since the front is made of glass panels while the room was installed with large windows.



Photo on the left: LC Baguio at the Bulwagang Juan Luna Building  
in 2006

Photo on the right: LC Baguio at the CSS-CSC Complex  
in 2007 up to the present

In setting up the office, we used old furniture like office tables and chairs borrowed from UP Baguio from as early as 1997. My personal collection of musical instruments were also displayed. The walls were adorned with donated art pieces like a reproduction of a Henri Matisse collage on canvas entitled *Beasts of the Sea* (1950). Indoor plants were also added. By November, office curtains were installed and a sala set and two bookshelves were added. There is also a receiving area and a separate room which serves as exam venue/mini-library/kitchen. Beside the Learning Center is the CSS-CSC Audio-Visual Room. Once in a while, the Learning Center also serves as venue for small group conversations among the UP Baguio community, its employees, students, alumni, and faculty members who attend conferences and seminars held at the CSS-CSC AVR.

Aside from the changes in its location, the LC Baguio, including the other seven Learning Centers stationed across the Philippines, has gone through massive changes as the UP Open University underwent two major reorganizations in its two decades of existence. Such changes highly affected the way the LC Coordinators performed their roles and the way the Learning Centers communicated with prospective applicants, held orientation programs, received enrolments, distributed learning materials, offered programs or courses, led tutorials, managed the testing centers, and conducted examinations.

## **LC Coordinators**

Four UP Baguio faculty members served as LC Coordinators (see Appendix 2) before I became coordinator for LC Baguio on December 2005. From 2000 to 2004, the LC Coordinators directly communicated with Dr. Myrna Rodriguez<sup>1</sup> regarding all the academic and non-academic Learning Center operations. However, by January 2004, the UP Open University underwent a major reorganization wherein the University's Office of the Vice Chancellor for Student Support Services (OVCSSS), Office of Student Affairs (OSA), and Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research and Development (OVCRD) were all abolished. The supervision of the Learning Centers was transferred from the OVCSSS to the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs (OVCAA).

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<sup>1</sup> UP Open University Vice Chancellor for Student Support and Student Services, 1998-2003

With the changes implemented, all of the Learning Centers were instructed to direct students' academic-related concerns to the concerned Faculty Offices. Meanwhile, administrative concerns of the Learning Centers were relayed to the OVCAA Administrative Officer, and soon after, some of the student concerns were communicated to the OUR, Dispatch Unit, Library, and other offices.

## **Prospective Applicants**

Prospective applicants were regular visitors at the Learning Centers. They inquired about the program offerings and took with them application forms. Those who came were from Baguio City and from other provinces of the Cordillera Administrative Region like Benguet, Mountain Province, Ifugao, and Abra. There were also those who came all the way from different provinces of Regions I, II, and III.

As the UP Open University gradually went fully online, fewer walk-ins visited the Learning Centers. Inquiries were usually made through emails, landline calls, and sometimes text messages. The number of people visiting the Learning Centers became even fewer after the Online Application System (OAS) was implemented in 2015. With the new system, prospective applicants get to fill-out the soft copy and submit their requirements directly to the Office of the University Registrar (OUR). Consequently, it lessened the bulk of paper that the Learning Centers regularly sent to the UP Open University Headquarters.

## **Student Orientation and Enrolment**

Before the UP Open University went fully online, the university explored various ways as to how it can effectively conduct orientation programs among its students. Table 1 shows how the conduct of orientation programs in UP Open University changed through the years.

When it came to enrolment, the UP Open University also explored various technologies to make the process easy and cost-effective for both the students and the University staff. During its first years, the UP Open University employed manual enrolment through the Learning Centers. At the time, the basis for enrolment was a copy of pre-registration forms which were provided by the OUR for the Learning Center's reference. Filled-out registration forms were processed and signed by staff. Re-

assessment for those who were not able to pre-register or needed to accomplish a change of matriculation were done at the Learning Center.

Year	Conduct of Orientation
1995 to 2000	Course orientation and enrolment were both conducted in a day. Later on, the orientation program was scheduled on a Saturday, after the enrolment period.
AY 2001-2002	The orientation program, usually lasting for an hour or two, involved a short introduction from both the LC Coordinator and the students; a discussion about the university, its officials, student forms, student policies, and grading system; and a question and answer portion. Instructional materials or modules as well as the Basic Computer Skills Handout prepared by OVCSSS were afterwards distributed to the students.
AY 2002-2003	A pre-recorded tape wherein the students were being welcomed by UP Open University officials was incorporated into the orientation program. This was supplemented by a question & answer portion between the LC Coordinator and the students.
AY 2003-2004	The Learning Centers distributed handouts on "How to be a Successful Online Student" prepared by the Online Teaching and Learning Laboratory (ONTELL).
AY 2006-2007	The orientation program was conducted face-to-face by UP Open University officials.
AY 2008-2009	The face to face orientation program was conducted only in the Learning Centers with big enrolment, particularly the LC Diliman, LC Headquarters, and LC Manila. For the rest of the Learning Centers, including the LC Baguio, an orientation kit (pre-recorded video in usb and other materials) was given to the new students.
AY 2012-2013	The general orientation program was conducted through a pre-recorded video presentation which students can access online.
AY 2013-2014	The general orientation was live-streamed at the HQ and at the same time, students in the Learning Centers are given opportunities to ask questions through chat messaging.
Present	The orientation is initiated mainly by OUR and the Faculty Offices without any involvement of the Learning Center.

Table 1. Changes in the conduct of orientation programs in UP Open University

During the Second Semester of AY 1999-2000, manual enrolment was simultaneously held in a day for both the new and continuing students. In the following semesters, the OUR decided to conduct separate enrolments for two weeks or more for the continuing and new students. Payment of tuition fees and other fees were done at any Philippine National Bank (PNB) branch since cash payments were not accepted in the Learning Centers. By 2004, the use of credit cards was implemented. Students then paid their tuition fees in the Learning Center and a summary of the transaction payments were sent to the Cash Office on a weekly basis.

In 2012, the Online Registration System (ORS) was implemented together with the Online Request for Documents. In the new system, there was no need for the students to go to the Learning Center anymore. They could enrol anytime during the enrolment period at their most convenient time and place, as long as they had a reliable Internet connection. Other online services which are now being availed by students via the Student Portal include the applications for Leave of Absence, application for graduation, viewing of grades, to name three.

## **Distribution of Modules**

Before, in 1995, modules and book supplements were distributed in the Learning Centers after the orientation program. In some instances, when the modules sent by the Dispatch Unit were insufficient in number or when the modules were not yet available, students would be requested to return at a later date. Those who could not come personally were asked to give an authorization letter to a family member, a relative, or even an officemate.

In 2010, students were given an option whether to pick up their modules or book supplements in the Learning Centers or receive them through direct mailing. Those who opted for the latter were charged with courier fees. By 2013, the options were to buy copies of modules in either pdf format or print. At present, soft copies of the modules are already incorporated in the enrolment fee. Students who want hard copies of the modules could buy them through the Online Bookstore.

Meanwhile, the reference books in the Learning Center were for room use only. Students were also issued a borrower's card which they used when borrowing books from the UP libraries. Currently, there is an online

library exclusive for UP Open University students. There is also the iLib or Integrated Library System which provides students access to online library resources that are available in all UP units.

## **Tutorials**

In 1995, students attended monthly face-to-face- tutorials and submitted their Tutor-Marked- Assignments. Classrooms used for the face-to-face tutorials were reserved by the Learning Center staff prior to the schedule of tutorials. The tutors were mostly faculty members from UP Baguio, and some were social work practitioners from the DSWD-CAR. The Learning Center availed itself of tutorial services until 2001 when the face-to-face tutorial was replaced by online tutorials through the Integrated Virtual Learning Environment (IVLE) and later on My Portal.

At the start, accessing online tutorials posed some difficulties for students residing in the remote areas of C.A.R. There were some who became discouraged to continue their program in the University because of the difficulties they were experiencing with the new system, while there were also others who were able to cope with the online tutorials eventually. Currently, all of the enrolled students at LC Baguio are adept with the online course tutorials being offered via the My Portal.

## **Testing Centers**

On 31 May 2008, the concept of a "mega-Learning Center project proposal" was brought up by then VCAA, Dr. Nengah Hermosa, together with Dr. Joane Serrano. A regional testing center will be created that will cater to students from CAR and nearby provinces. Students who come from the province will be spared from long hours of travel by allowing them to take their examinations in the testing center nearest their home or workplace. The considerations for a possible testing center were: the willingness of the institution to serve as a testing center, its being a well-known institution in the province, its accessibility, and Internet connection.

From July to October 2008, Noreen Marie Follosco served as a project assistant and was in charge of the Learning Center while I travelled to three institutions in CAR, namely the Ifugao State College of Agriculture and Forestry (now Ifugao State University or IfSU), Mountain Province

State Polytechnic College (MPSPC), and Divine Word College of Bangued (DWCB). My meeting with Dr. Nieves Dacyon<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Faith Basilio<sup>2</sup>, and Prof. Delia Pascua<sup>3</sup> led to the creation of two satellite testing centers in MPSPC and IfSU. In 2010, the supervision of the testing centers in Mariano Marcos State University (MMSU) and Bani DepEd District Office was transferred from the Virtual LC to the LC Baguio, while in 2013, the Learning Center in Cagayan State University (CSU) was converted into a testing center and was put under the LC Baguio.



Figure 1. The LC Baguio with the five testing centers indicated by arrows

At present, five testing centers are under the LC Baguio. The administrative concerns of the students enrolled in the testing centers, preparation and follow-up for the payments of proctor, letters of request for the renewal of proctors and contracts of lease also comprised the functions of the LC Coordinator in handling the testing centers. Figure 1 shows the location of LC Baguio relative to the five testing centers.

1 President, Mountain Province State Polytechnic College  
 2 Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, Ifugao State University  
 3 Dean, Divine Word College of Bangued

## Examination

There are two kinds of examinations administered by UP Open University: online proctored exams and sit-down proctored exams. Online proctored exams are taken anywhere by the students while sit-down proctored exams are usually scheduled on a Saturday and require students' physical presence in the Learning Center. With the University going fully online, there has been a continuous increase in online exams, thus the number of students coming to the Learning Center has decreased significantly. In this case, the proctor uses only one classroom during exams with less than 20 examinees. The chairs are being arranged in such a way that the students can be separated to occupy one side for open-notes exam and another for closed-notes exam. Figure 2 shows the number of students who took sit-down final exams from AY 2004-2005 to AY 2013-2014.

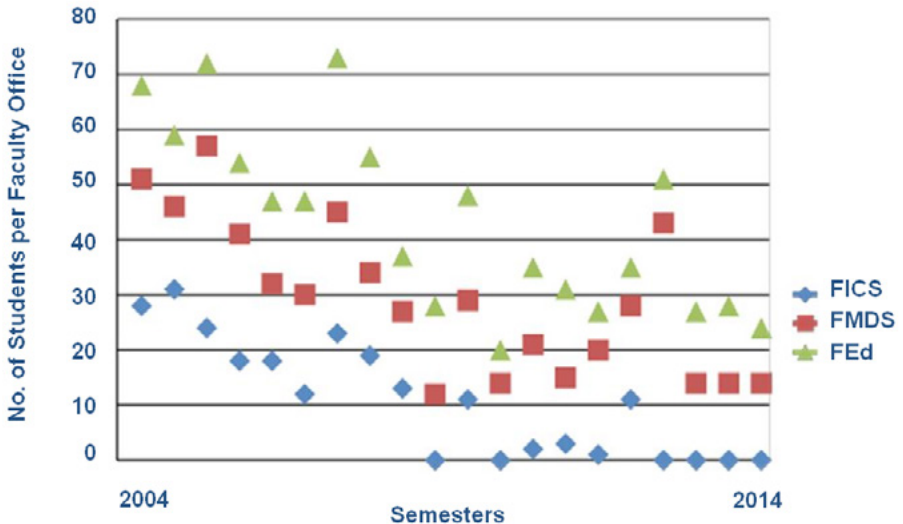


Figure 2. Actual number of students who took sit-down final exams from AY 2004-2005 to AY 2013-2014

Students were allowed to also take their exam not only in their designated Learning Center or testing center but also in other testing centers or Learning Centers, provided that they have submitted a "Request for

Change in Exam Venue” at least two weeks before the exam. The usual reason for requests for change in exam venue are: transfer of work assignment, attending a seminar, visit to a relative, or a job vacation for overseas workers. For those who were not able to take their exam during exam date, they would ask for permission from their FIC for re-scheduling of the exam.

## **The Future of the Learning Center**

Nowadays, students rarely visit the Learning Center. They only come to pick up their requested documents (e.g. ID, TCG, OTR, diploma) or to get their validation ID Sticker, if there are any. Otherwise, they just send their inquiries through email, call, or via text message. Meanwhile, the Learning Center remains as a venue, from time to time, for short conversations among the students, alumni, faculty, and employees of the UP community.

In the near future, I envision the Learning Center to become a Global Learning Center. It will be a repository of knowledge about the UP Open University and other Open Universities, both local and international. It will contain a collection of research publications on ODeL in various formats and it will be open to the public. My own view is that the university will continue to uphold “honor and excellence” in all its undertakings; to foster camaraderie and unity between and among members of the whole UP community, all for the good of our country. I hope that the UP Open University will continue to be a leader in ODeL, not only by widening access to quality higher education but also by pursuing a model of ODeL that is proudly “Tatak Pinoy” or Filipino-Made. Finally, as student support services evolve through time, the UP Open University, being a learner-centered university, will continue to adapt to the changing needs of its students. Meanwhile, the Learning Center, being an integral part of the university, will continue to be flexible in adapting to changes implemented by the institution, as it has been doing for the past two decades.

# Adapting Student Support Services

By Arleen M. Tampus<sup>1</sup>

I am Arleen Tampus, Coordinator in LC Cebu. I have been with the UP Open University for almost two decades, and I have gone through the changes implemented by the University when it comes to its student support services. Hence, in this article, I share my own appreciation of the five generations of distance education of the UP Open University.

I joined the UP Open University in August 1997 as a University Extension Associate hired to assist the then LC Coordinator and Associate Dean of UP Cebu, Dr. Primitivo Ereno (see Appendix 3). The UP Cebu Learning Center, as it was called during the SDE setup, offered three post-baccalaureate programs during my first semester with the center.

The LC Cebu was situated inside the UP High School Campus in Lahug, Cebu City. It shared a room with the Master of Education Program (M. Ed). With this room sharing, the Learning Center was allowed to use the computer, furniture, telephone, electric fan, and occasionally even the assigned student assistant of M. Ed. Being housed at the High School Department proved to be convenient, because it was here where most of the tutors were stationed and monthly study sessions were held.

## **The Learning Center Cebu**

When I started at the UP Open University, the LC Cebu had limited office equipment. I relied on the facilities of UP Cebu in performing some of my clerical tasks. Making long distance calls to the UP Open University Headquarters entailed having to cross the street of Lahug to reach the

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<sup>1</sup> LC Coordinator, Cebu

Dean's Office where the phone for making authorized long distance calls was made. In order to take hold of a manual typewriter, I would go to the Accounting Section of the University where they had a bulky but durable typewriter. I would unobtrusively finish typing my vouchers in the corner where the typewriter was located while the office was abuzz with transactions for the day.

In November 1997, the LC Cebu received funding for the procurement of office furniture and equipment. I was pretty excited to canvass equipment such as an overhead projector, projector screen, monobloc chairs, an office table, a cabinet with pigeon holes, and guess what, a portable typewriter! A month later, during a meeting with the rest of the Learning Center staff and coordinators at the UP Open University Headquarters, one of the agenda was the turn-over of equipment purchased from the Department of Science and Technology Project for the Learning Centers. Each Learning Center was given a fax machine, a cassette recorder, and one complete set of computer system.

Since 1995, LC Cebu was located in the UP High School Campus until a request for a separate office was granted in 1999. The Learning Center was given a 35 square meter room on the ground floor of the Arts and Sciences Building which was situated in the campus across the UP Cebu Administration Building. LC Cebu moved into the new office space at the later part of 1999 and has since then been renting the place.

At that time, UP Open University underwent a major reorganization. Since then, the UP Open University's student support services have continuously adapted to developments in technology and society. From 1995 up to the present, the University adapted various technologies in order to deliver quality education to its distance learners. From delivering course content via print, the university adapted the teletutorial mode and then changed gears with the introduction of online teaching through the Integrated Virtual Learning Environment (IVLE). Eventually, the University shifted to an open source learning platform called the Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (MOODLE) to further reach out to global learners. This modification of approaches in the UP Open University's student support services were implemented during the different generations by which the open and distance learning at the UP Open University evolved through the years. In a speech before the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Institutions of Higher Learning (ASAIHL) on 19 September 2008 at the Jose Rizal University,

Dr Grace Javier Alfonso<sup>1</sup> presented the five generations of open and distance learning (ODL) that the UP Open University had adopted. The succeeding paragraphs describe the different generations as indicated in the Chancellor's speech in the context of the various student support services provided at LC Cebu.

## **Hitting the Road Across Generation 1: Print-based Learning**

When I applied for the job at the UP Open University, my understanding of distance education was that of the traditional correspondence school where the student and the teacher never meet. However, upon joining the UP Open University, I have learned that distance learning also involved face-to-face monthly study sessions as students interacted with their teachers and classmates in real time. As Dr. Alfonso described it, Generation 1 is "the shedding off of some residential traditions."

The monthly face-to-face study sessions set the UP Open University apart from traditional correspondence schools. Study sessions were administered by local tutors, some of whom were full-time professors of UP Cebu while others were recommended by the UP Open University Head Office. My first exposure to a monthly study session was barely two weeks after I started work at the UP Open University. As early as 7 am, the Learning Center in Cebu was already buzzing with adult learners from different parts of the Visayas and Mindanao, bringing with them their bags and modules. During study sessions, students submitted their assignments to their respective tutors and discussions were conducted between tutors and students. Part of my task during study sessions was to provide equipment for the tutor's use as well as to assist them in operating the overhead projector and slide projector.

All tutors underwent training for the particular courses they handled for a particular semester. They were also required to attend General Tutors' Trainings so that they could facilitate the monthly study sessions in accordance to the guidelines set by the University. Fly-in tutors from Bohol and Manila would come to Cebu to facilitate the monthly study sessions even in inclement weather and harsh weather conditions. Aside from conducting monthly study sessions, tutors (whether locally based or fly-in) were also responsible in marking students' assignments and accomplishing the Score Sheets for each assignment. The Learning

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<sup>1</sup> UP Open University Chancellor, 2007-2016

Center staff then collected the scoresheets and sent them to the UP Open University Headquarters via courier service.

When it came to program offerings, not all Learning Centers offered the programs of the university during Generation 1. There were programs that were offered only in selected Learning Centers. For instance, the Diploma in Social Studies Education program was offered in LC Iloilo but not in LC Cebu, while the Diploma in Computer Science program was offered in LC Cebu and not in LC Iloilo. Although applications were accepted for all programs, successful applicants were transferred to other Learning Centers outside Cebu even if they submitted their applications in Cebu.

In Generation 1, examinations were administered by the tutors themselves during the study sessions. Most of the exams in that period were proctored and were sitdown exams. Exams, like the rest of the communications from head office, found their way to the Learning Center using a courier service.

As for the registration system during Generation 1, enrolment dates were divided into two: one for Non-Teacher Programs and another for the Teacher Programs. At that time, the registration was a whole day activity for the students as well as for the local tutors and fly-in tutors. That is because the enrolment, general and course orientation, and distribution of course materials were all held within a day.

Since the delivery of the course content in the early years of the UP Open University was largely through print, boxes of course materials were sent via the Kabayan Forwarders to the LC Cebu. And from the Learning Center, we transported the modules to the Audio Visual Room of UP Cebu where the General Orientation and the distribution of modules took place. The volume of these modules was based on the number of enrollees during the previous semester. The problem with this arrangement was a number of extra modules piled up at the Learning Center because of those students who were enrolled in the previous semester, but decided not to enrol in the succeeding semesters.

## **Engaging in Alternative Learning Modes in Generation 2**

According to Dr. Alfonso, one of the indications that the university was

moving towards Generation 2 was the abolition of the Schools of Distance Education and the merging of disciplines under four Faculty Offices: Faculty of Management, Faculty of Science and Technology, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities and Arts, and Faculty of Health Sciences. New UP Open University officials assumed office in their new posts in May 1999.

As new programs were added, there came instances wherein only few students would enrol in a particular program and assigning a tutor was not cost-effective. To address this problem, a memo from OVCSSS<sup>1</sup> (PELS Reference Memo 98-0603 dated June 4, 1998) was released during the First Semester of AY 1998-1999 that involved the introduction of a new form of learning support service to classes with very few students. This particular mode was called teletutorial, an arrangement wherein a tutor in Los Baños or Diliman conducted a study session with students in other Learning Centers via the telephone or a speakerphone.

The teletutorial mode was challenging in terms of technology because we had connectivity problems with the tutor in Los Baños. This also brought mixed reactions from students because some would express concern as to why they could not have the teletutorial right in their homes instead of in the Learning Center. Nevertheless, such obstacles did not stop the students from continuing and completing their studies with the UP Open University.

Since there were courses in MPH<sup>2</sup> that had no local tutors and fly-in tutors were no longer employed due to high cost of travel, sessions were also delivered in teletutorial mode via the speakerphone or the starfish. In this mode, MPH students would huddle around the speakerphone since it was difficult to hear the teacher who was also using the speakerphone in LC Manila. Students who had questions looked funny as they had to come very near the speakerphones so they could be heard by the teacher. They could not help but laugh quietly at how ridiculous they seemed to be. When we received the speakerphone manufactured by Robotics, teletutorials were a lot better because the sound of the speakers was clearer. The equipment was called the "starfish" because it looked like a big black starfish.

Aside from the teletutorials that were conducted for students of teacher

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1 Office of the Vice Chancellor for Student Support Services

2 Master of Public Health

programs, videoconferencing was also held for some of the monthly study sessions in the MPH program. The UP Open University made videoconferencing possible by making arrangements with DOST<sup>1</sup> Cebu and DOST-ASTI<sup>2</sup> in Diliman so that the students could gather at DOST Cebu to hear and see their Manila-based teacher conduct a session via videoconferencing. The Learning Center was charged by the DOST for the service.

In Generation 2, learning materials were more varied as teachers also made use of audio and video materials to supplement the modules. The LC Cebu continued to accept applications for admission and students still registered at the Learning Center. Monthly sessions were still conducted at the Learning Center and exams were still proctored by tutors.

### **Attending Virtual Classrooms in Generation 3**

During monthly study sessions, I could not help but overhear comments from students especially those who were not from Cebu that they had to brave strong winds and waves since the weather was not always conducive for travel. There were times when students called or messaged us to ask if sessions would push through as they could not purchase boat tickets or plane tickets because of an impending storm. Because of these concerns, added to problems of sustaining face-to-face tutorials which were becoming rather expensive and cumbersome to manage due to the increasing number of enrollees located across the Philippines, the UP Open University decided to deliver courses online.

In 2001, the UP Open University stepped into the age of Generation 3 as the university started offering courses online. According to Dr. Alfonso, Generation 3 of open and distance education at the UP Open University saw the “active movement in developing a comprehensive online system.” This new mode of delivering courses gradually replaced the monthly face-to-face sessions as courses were now either offered online or IT-mediated. In Cebu, face-to-face study sessions became limited to courses in the MPH program that still maintained its local tutors. The online courses used the Integrated Virtual Learning Environment (IVLE) platform to deliver course content. To describe this format, I would like to quote a paragraph from the study made by the late Dr. Victoria

1 Department of Science and Technology

2 Department of Science and Technology - Advanced Science and Technology Institute

Bautista and Prof. Ma. Ana Quimbo entitled “Modes of Learning and Performance Among UP Open University Graduates.”

*“The Integrated Virtual Learning Environment, as a learning platform allows online interaction between students and teachers and among students themselves. It features a discussion forum where students and teachers can post their concerns and have asynchronous discussion with each other. It also has a work bin where students and teachers can upload study materials such as course, guides, readings, assignments, among others. Students and teachers can also do synchronous interactions using the IVLE’s instant messaging system.”*

With the advent of the online offering of courses, Learning Centers were able to accept applications for admissions to all programs offered by the University except in the MPH program which was offered only in Manila and Cebu. Such development led to increased access to quality UP education. The problems encountered by students who had to travel to Cebu to attend sessions were no longer an issue. Students could now enrol in the nearest Learning Center from their residence and there was no need to attend monthly sessions as the courses were now offered online. The composition of students in Cebu was now mostly residents from Cebu, Bohol, Dumaguete, Leyte, and other areas in Mindanao.

However, there were still some students, especially those who had very little idea on how to go online, who longed for the face-to-face sessions. To help these students understand and appreciate the new mode of course delivery, the OVCSSS released a handout entitled “Beginner’s Guide to the Internet” in December 2001. In May 2002, ONTELL Technical Support released a handout entitled “Online Learning at the UPOU” which attempted to explain online learning, define terms, and guide students on how to use the IVLE. In LC Cebu, we conducted basic computer tutorials to UP Open University students interested to learn some basic computer literacy skills. We offered basic computer tutorials on how to turn on the computer, how to create an email address, how to email, how to go on the Internet, and most importantly, how to access and navigate the IVLE course site.

Since courses were now delivered online, the administration of sit-down exams was now assigned to the LC Coordinators. Online sessions enabled students to directly communicate with their respective

faculty-in-charge. Communication between student and teacher no longer had to pass through the Learning Centers unlike in the first few years of the UP Open University. Since Faculty offices also provided support services to students, academic concerns of students were addressed readily and feedback given promptly.

Students submitted their online assignments at the Learning Center, especially those enrolled in IT-mediated courses and those who experience difficulty in uploading the assignments in the bin. In Generation 3, the Learning Center still functioned as a place where interested individuals inquired; where applications were submitted; and where applicants took the entrance exams, where students enrolled, claimed their modules, attended general orientations, submitted online assignments, took their proctored exams, and filed different requests for documents. However, as the delivery of coursework evolved, the hustle and bustle at the Learning Center gradually diminished in the succeeding semesters. The bulk of the activity at the Learning Center was only during enrolment and examinations when the students converged to take their proctored exams.

Another change implemented in Generation 3 was in the UP Open University's registration system; the Office of the University Registrar (OUR) implemented the Early Registration System. Its goal was to serve students better by scheduling the registration and distribution of course packages on different dates. I was a bit apprehensive about the scheme at first since it meant students would have to go to the Learning Center twice, and this would mean additional travel expenses especially for those who were not from Cebu. However, I eventually saw the rationale of the new system since it meant the office in charge with printing the modules will only be printing enough modules for students who actually enrolled for that particular semester. With this, there would be fewer extra modules lying in the center's bookshelf.

Later on, provisions were instituted that delivery of course materials could either be picked up at the Learning Center or directly mailed to the student's preferred mailing address for a fee. This development contributed to the ease in the accessing materials and also decreasing the number of students dropping by the office to claim modules.

## Racing to Full Online Delivery in Generation 4

After IVLE, the UP Open University transferred to an open source platform called Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (MOODLE), signaling the start of Generation 4. According to Dr. Alfonso, Generation 4 of open and distance learning at the UP Open University came about as “the race to full online delivery was on and the move to address the digital divide was afoot.” This generation brought along with it a number of changes especially in the mode of delivery of course content among distance learners. Course sites were now more user-friendly and there were additional features in the site that made the courses more interesting. Students were required to upload assignments in Assignment Bins instead of submitting online assignments at the Learning Center. Some of the modules could also be accessed as PDF files at the course sites.

With a number of courses now fully delivered online after the transition to MOODLE, student support services in the University likewise developed systems by which it could respond to the digitalization of the delivery of course content. In the summer of 2012, the OUR pilot-tested the newly developed Online Registration System which was designed to enable students to process their enrolment at the comfort of their homes or offices. Under the new system, students could enrol without having to go to the Learning Center. A provision in the system also allowed students to make online payments which helped students who had no time to go to the Philippine National Bank (PNB) or did not have the patience to wait in line for their turn at the teller. Online Request for Documents was also incorporated in the Student Portal to allow students to request their documents at the convenience of their homes or offices. Online Application System (OAS) was later introduced. Interested applicants apply online but however are still required to submit the hard copies of their documents either at the Learning Center or mail them directly to the Admissions Section of the OUR at the UPOU Headquarters.

With these developments, the number of students who came to the office eventually dwindled. Students only went to the office if they had proctored exams or if they opted to pick up their documents at the Learning Center. It was quite noticeable that only a few dropped by the office to enrol although there were still students who would go to the Learning Center because they felt that assistance would be readily given in case they encountered difficulties in enrolling or applying.

When faculties-in-charge were given the option to administer their exams online, proctored exams at the Learning Center also become fewer. At times, LC Cebu administered proctored exams to less than 10 students. We no longer needed to look for a bigger venue for the exams since the examinees could be accommodated in the office. In Generation 4, academic procedures that used to be done at the Learning Center were now being handled by other offices at the head office.

## **Helping Build Global Communities in Generation 5**

Generation 5 at the UP Open University “addresses the need to help build global learning communities” (Alfonso, 2008). As the University moved across generations, there were changes in the set-up of Learning Centers in the Philippines to conform to the changing pace of the university. Learning Centers with low enrolment were converted to testing centers, while more testing centers were established in areas where there were no UP campuses. Starting AY 2012-2013, UP-based Learning Centers were assigned specific testing centers for them to supervise. Each testing center had a designated proctor whose task is to administer the examination and send the used and unused examinations to the respective Faculty offices in the head office. The services offered by testing centers were now limited to the administration of proctored exams. Inquiries regarding the UP Open University, registration of students and requests for documents can be done online or can be forwarded to the Learning Center assigned to said testing center.

## **Retrospect and Prospects**

Across the five generations of distance education at the UP Open University, Learning Centers were able to adapt to the different modifications in student support services. Its flexibility to adjust to new technologies helped the university carry out significant changes in the delivery of courses through the past 21 years. Writing this narrative helped me understand the wisdom behind all the changes in the University’s system as these responded to the UP Open University’s mandate to provide greater access to quality UP education among Filipinos here and abroad. The shifts in the modes of delivery of coursework/content and in learning support services were instituted in order to bridge the geographical gap significantly between the institution and the students

in the most economical yet effective way.

As I look back 19 years ago when I first set my eyes on the UP Open University mace painted on the wall of the LC Cebu at the High School Campus, I am overwhelmed by the changes that had been occurring in the university. I am proud to have witnessed and participated in this development. My UP Open University experience truly helped me gain confidence especially since most of the Learning Centers are manned by a LC Coordinator and a staff for big Learning Centers. In my opinion, this experience gave each one of us room to be resourceful, creative, responsible, and open to change and challenges. I enjoyed the camaraderie I have forged with the other Learning Center staff and I respect and try to emulate their unwavering commitment to their jobs which they have held for several years. It is heartwarming to know that being employed in the "University of Second Chance," I was able to serve my alma mater in helping adult learners fulfill their elusive dream: that of earning a UP diploma.



# Dealing with Diversity of Students

By Carlota T. Yoingco<sup>1</sup>

I am Carlota Yoingco, Coordinator at the Learning Center that has the most diverse and most number of students in the UP Open University, the LC Diliman. I would like to share with you the strategies the Learning Centers employ when it comes to dealing with a huge volume and very diverse group of students. In this narrative, I will discuss how we adapted to the varying needs of the students and how we made sure that each one of them was served by the Learning Centers well. To start off, let me discuss with you the everyday operations in the Learning Centers.

The Learning Centers are demographically established and are strategically located in the country. The UP Open University has eight Learning Centers; one of it is in Diliman. The centers are the venue for face-to-face study sessions and for proctored or supervised examinations. Students go to the Learning Centers to seek advice and apply for admission, registration, orientation, dropping of course, leave of absence, and examination. They also visit the Learning Centers to access library materials and to ask for assistance on the online classes.

We, the Learning Centers coordinators, are the ones tasked to provide a venue for student initiatives, review classes and consultation meetings with the faculty-in-charge. We are also the ones who facilitate venue reservations, assist in the thesis defense, and respond to email inquiries.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of students among the eight Learning Centers. It could be seen in the Figure that for the Second Term AY 2014-2015, the LC Diliman had the largest number of enrolled students compared to the other seven Learning Centers. This is the usual situation in the Learning Centers every term. Nevertheless, handling a large volume

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<sup>1</sup> Coordinator, LC Diliman

of applicants and students is not a problem in our part as long as Internet connection, computers, space and library materials are available in our office.

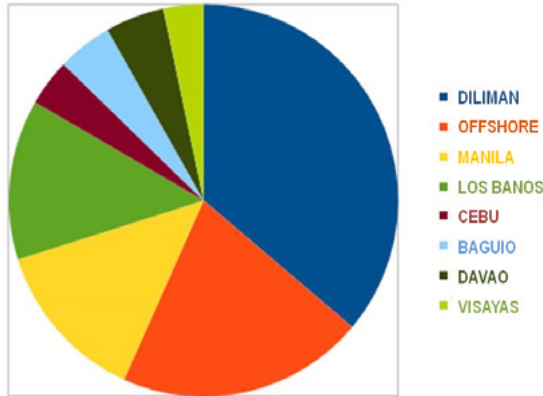


Figure 1. Enrolment in the Learning Centers for 2nd Term AY 2014-2015

Internet access is very important to our Learning Centers. Through email, I get to accept submissions of e-copies of all registration matters and applications for dropping, leave of absence, comprehensive exam, and graduation. Majority of student and applicant inquiries are also entertained via email. Facilitation of online proctored examination is also a challenge for our Learning Centers to better manage the huge volume of students each semester.

### Enrolment and Registration

In LC Diliman, the most number of students usually visit during registration period. However, with the transition from manual enrolment to online enrolment and virtual class, as shown in Figure 2, the number of students visiting the Learning Centers has somehow lessened.

Before the university went fully online in 2011, enrolment in the Learning Centers was manual. During those days, my clerk and I were assisted by other UP Open University employees from the Office of the University Registrar (OUR) and Cash Office. I was the one responsible for assessing fees and attending to student queries, while four UP Open University staff were assigned to attend to inquiries, assess fees, collect payment, and distribute instructional materials. Oftentimes, I was the one managing

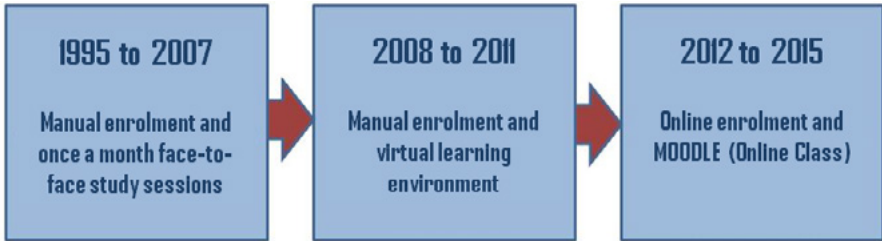


Figure 2. Timeline of the transition from manual enrolment to online enrolment and virtual class

the routine steps in the registration procedure. Signages showing steps from getting a registration form to claiming instructional materials were posted in the office.

During the manual registration period, Saturdays usually had the most number of students. We managed to accommodate them with procedural plans (see Figure 3). This helped us entertain around 100 to 200 registrants in a day. It was also an advantage to us that we were then located in the Information and Communication Technology Office (ICTO) building (formerly National Computer Center or NCC building) because we had a bigger space to accommodate students.

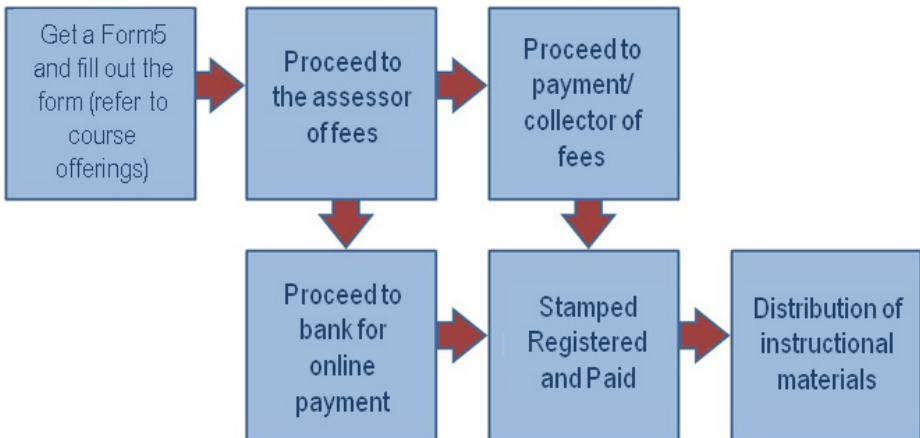


Figure 3. Flow of Manual Registration

The largest volume of attendees (about 300 of them) in the general orientation was in 2003; this was an unforgettable experience for me. The general orientation at that time was held at the lobby of the NCC

Building in Diliman as it was the most convenient place to hold one.

Another unforgettable general orientation for me was in 2011 when no UP Open University faculty was physically present. The general orientation was held via Web stream connecting the LC Diliman with the UP Open University Headquarters. It was held in the PHIVOLCS<sup>1</sup> Auditorium to accommodate the huge volume of students. The event went smoothly as the students were only listening to the Web streamed general orientation. However, during the Q&A part of the activity, not all questions were answered because there was not enough time and the number of online queries were overwhelming. Instead, I opted to randomly entertain and answer a number of inquiries after the Web stream viewing. And since not all queries were answered, I advised the students to just send an email inquiry to the concerned offices or program chairs.

By 2012, the number of students visiting the LC Diliman had decreased, all thanks to the launching of the Online Registration System (ORS). For me, the ORS was easy to use and student-friendly. I can still remember when it was introduced; I was able to easily give students instructions even over the telephone. However, despite the transition to the online platform, other students would still go to the Learning Center to upload their proof of payment, pay via credit card terminals, and access the online payment system.

## **Student Inquiries**

After the UP Open University shifted to the online platform in 2011, most students began inquiring through telephone. To make sure that all callers were accommodated, I made it a rule in the LC Diliman that as much as possible, responses to phone inquiries should be brief but informative. Although there were still some people who came to the Learning Center to inquire about admission and specific programs, the number has become more manageable than before. I have also employed a strategy in the LC Diliman in which walk-ins are simultaneously accommodated in groups of two to five people to save space and time. This strategy has also contributed to the fast dissemination of information among students since those oriented get to pass information to other inquirers.

Aside from phone and walk-in inquiries, there are other students who

<sup>1</sup> Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology

communicated with me through email. Some of them informed me of their life experience in Distance Education program, while others asked to arrange rooms for review classes, schedule an appointment with the faculty-in-charge (FIC), request or follow-up on documents, and ask about admissions. If we talk about the volume of emails, as of mid-2015, I am very happy to tell you that the incoming email is less than 20 per day. It will only rise when the midterm or final examination is nearing.

## **Dealing with Different Types of Students**

As the UP Open University delivered courses completely online in 2012, students tend to come to our office only during midterm and final examinations. However, given the diversity of the students in the Learning Center, it could not be helped that some of them would need special attention when taking the exam. For situations like these, I am informed by the students beforehand via email.

In distance education, there is a need to understand that each person has his/her uniqueness. In the LC Diliman itself, students vary in terms of their socioeconomic status, age, physical ability, religious and political beliefs. In my years of working as a LC Coordinator, I have already dealt with different students with different needs; some of them include: religious groups; politicians, actors, and actresses; young, middle-aged, and elderly; and physically challenged.

This is how I deal with the varied needs of the four groups mentioned above:

### **1. Religious Groups**

As a LC Coordinator, it is better if I prepare and announce our schedule of examinations early because our regular midterm and final examination is usually scheduled on Saturdays, and I would often receive emails from students who would request a different day of examination due to conflicts in their religion. Arranging for a different examination day for these students are usually hassle-free since the FICs are very much accommodating and are usually willing to schedule a Friday examination for those who cannot make it on a Saturday. The only concern in scheduling different dates of examination is the possibility of leakage of exams. To avoid this, the FIC would make

different sets of examination papers for the Friday and Saturday tests.

## 2. Politicians, Actors, and Actresses

Being located in the metropolis, the LC Diliman is known as the “LC of the stars.” Because the University offers education at one’s pace and time, a number of politicians, actors, and actresses get encouraged to enrol in the Learning Center to pursue higher education. Given their busy schedule and professional commitments, there will be times when these students would ask for my assistance to help them look for a personal tutor. Also, considering their security and safety, I often arrange special examinations for them. However, there are also some who are very willing to join the other regular students in taking examinations.

## 3. Young, Middle-aged, and Elderly

For young students, it is usually their parents who ask about their academic information such as their standing, schedule of exam, missed submission of assignments, or exams. In these instances, we highly recommend to the parents that they encourage their sons or daughters to send their query to us via email. Moreover, there are instances wherein groups of young students would come to the office to read or study. These groups would sometimes make loud noises inside our room and disturb everyone (especially the proctors and the students who are taking their exam). In these cases, I would tell the students to stay in the lobby or to avoid staying in the office in large groups.

For the middle-aged students, they are the ones who are more independent and confident. Most of their queries are about how they could contact the FIC. However, a few middle-aged students could also sometimes be hard to deal with, especially when they are frustrated with procedural problems or when they are unable to receive immediate answers from the FIC. For these cases, I jot down all concerns, explain the situation, and follow up on the FIC or the Program Chair.

Lastly, the elderly. Because their generation is not as inclined to technology as the young and the middle-aged students, elderly students would usually come to the Learning Center for assistance on how to navigate their online class. They would usually ask us to guide them on how to operate their course site, assist them on what to look

for in the course site, and explain to them what they should see in their course site. We would also explain to them the difference between the Academic Information Management System (AIMS) and the online course site.

#### 4. Physically Challenged



Students on wheelchair taking the examination

Applicants for undergraduate programs need to take an Undergraduate Admission Test (UAT). Before the test, the OUR-Admissions section informs me (or sometimes the other way around) if there is an examinee who needs to take the exam in a more accessible room. The usual problem is that the room on the ground floor of the ICTO building is occupied by their offices, hence we often conduct the exam in Dr. Grace Alfonso's office.

For the regular examinations like midterms and finals, I further assist physically challenged students by inviting them to have an online proctored examination. Ronelyn Marasigan, Coordinator for the Virtual Learning Center, gave me an instruction manual for online proctored examination wherein I learned a lot about advanced online proctoring. In the instruction manual, I added facilities like screen sharing and Google documents. In AY 2014-2015, I listed students with medical condition and/or with physical disabilities that I know of and invited

them to have an online proctored examination. The feedback from the students was positive, and they said that it was very convenient for them.

In a situation wherein the student prefers to have his/her examination in the Learning Center, I would prepare a room at the ground floor and a proctor for him/her depending on his/her needs. During the midterm and final examinations, I would make sure that I have visited the examination venue to check on the students who are taking the examination. There are times when I can find an obvious reason to consider a student as one with a special need but of course I cannot identify all students who need special attention. As much as I wanted to extend my assistance to them during the examination, I could not help them if they did not notify me beforehand.

With the main purpose of fulfilling each and every student's needs, my work as Coordinator in LC Diliman helped improve my communication skills, knowledge on Distance Education program, and decision-making skills. Together with my clerk, we performed our everyday tasks with flexibility and patience. Even though there are only two of us in the LC Diliman, my clerk and I would always make sure that as representatives of the UP Open University, we give our best as public servants in the center. Every day, different people with different personalities challenge our patience, organizational ability, and leadership in the Learning Center. There are even times when I would need to deal with people who do not accept the best information we can provide. However, with enough flexibility, patience, and understanding in every given situation, we get by with our everyday tasks in the Learning Center. After all, our main priority is to help students get their degree.

# Touching Lives

By Erlinda M. Manarin<sup>1</sup>

I am Erlinda Manarin, Coordinator in LC Manila, and I have been with the UP Open University for two decades now. I would like to share with you my appreciation of the University's personalized approach to its student support services as well as highlight its philosophy of student centeredness by featuring the stories of some of the students in the Learning Center. But first, let me discuss with you the history of LC Manila.

The LC Manila was established in 1997 at a Mezzanine Room in the UP Manila College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) on Padre Faura. Face-to-face study sessions were held once a month on a Saturday. Prof Harry Engle<sup>2</sup> was the first coordinator for LC Manila (see Appendix 2). At that time, enrolment totaled only about more than a hundred for all the four programs. I was with the School for Distance Education Manila (SDE Manila) in 1995 and then with the Faculty of Health of Sciences when the UP Open University was reorganized in 2000. I was among those who used to assist the Learning Center during registration.

When the UP Open University reorganized in 2004, the Faculty of Health Sciences was abolished. The programs under it were absorbed by the Faculty of Management and Development Studies (FMDS), located in the UP Open University Headquarters. That was the time when I was assigned as the LC Coordinator in Manila. The former Faculty of Health Sciences Office became the Learning Center. When I assumed the post of LC Coordinator, I was given an assistant. Since 2006, the LC Manila holds office on the Ground Floor of the Philippine Nurses Association (PNA) Building in Malate, Manila.

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<sup>1</sup> Coordinator, LC Manila

<sup>2</sup> Faculty member at UP Manila and a UP Open University affiliate faculty

## Evolution of Student Support

In the early years of the UP Open University, registration was done manually. Students needed to queue to have their registration forms assessed. After that, they had to go to the nearest Philippine National Bank (PNB) to pay their matriculation fees, return to the Learning Center to have their Form 5 stamped, and then come back a few days later to have their instructional materials picked up. Several years after, the Learning Centers became equipped with credit card terminals. Students were given the option to pay their matriculation fees through credit cards. Majority of the students preferred using credit cards for convenience and safety despite the surcharge.

With the introduction of new Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as the Integrated Virtual Learning Environment (IVLE) in 2001 and Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (MOODLE) in 2007, most, if not all of the courses, were offered online. There were only occasional cases of modules being picked up at the Learning Center. Students were given the option to either have the printed or electronic copy of the modules.

Registration was conducted completely online starting Academic Year 2012-2013. Students did not have to go to the Learning Center to enrol. With everything being conducted online, undeniably, there was a remarkable decrease in the Learning Center tasks. We no longer attended to registration. We no longer distributed learning packages. Students' requests for documents were submitted online. Most examinations were also administered online. Amidst these changes, life in the Learning Center went on. We still received inquiries through phone and email. Visitors still came to the Learning Center to inquire. Students still went to the Learning Center for varied student-related transactions. There were still sit-down examinations at the LC Manila or sometimes in another venue if the Learning Center could not accommodate them.

With the increasing number of enrollees specifically in the health sciences programs, the LC Manila served as the venue for their clinical practicum, pre- and post-conferences, thesis proposal presentations and defense, students' group studies, Google hangouts, comprehensive examinations, and other academic activities. It was during these times that the support of the UP Open University Administration could not be discounted. The Learning Centers were provided with equipment and facilities which

enabled us to efficiently serve our faculty and students. Personal computers, laptops, and LCD projectors were made available as the UP Open University progressed. Wireless Internet connection followed suit.



MAN Program thesis presentation at LC Manila

Google hangout between N 219.3 students and Dr. Teresita I. Barcelo



Scholarships and student loans were also made available to some students. Aside from free matriculation, scholarship grantees received stipends. Students who opted for loans, on the other hand, could apply for up to 80% (maximum) of the assessed matriculation fee and were allowed to pay either by installment or lump sum on or before the end of the semester the loan was granted.

## Student Support at the Learning Center Manila

Learning Center + student support = me. That's how I see myself. This is because for the past twenty years with the UP Open University, I have been doing student support. Way back from my SDE Manila days until the time I assumed the post of LC Coordinator, I considered myself a hands-on coordinator. I believe that my purpose is to make things easier for the students. This is because in an open university where the main feature is the physical separation of students from the classroom and the teachers, students undergo a certain period of adjustment. The Learning Center is where they could have company. It is where student support services are provided to them in any form applicable: tangible and

be a good facilitator. She/He should always make sure that the only two things students need to worry about are learning and producing good course work.

*“The adventures of being a distance learner is a unique experience. It’s truly the road less traveled as far as college experiences are concerned.”*

This is to quote a BAMS<sup>1</sup> graduate of the UP Open University (a transferee from a non-UP institution). She said she needed help in adjusting not only to the standards of being a UP student but also to the unique learning setup of the UP Open University. She said the Learning Center had been an integral part of her UP Open University experience because staff always attended to her queries on how to go about registration, classes, examinations, and basically most things apart from learning. She eventually graduated magna cum laude.

Below are the direct words from an MHA<sup>2</sup> graduate. It is quite inspiring to hear and read such words of gratitude and appreciation from the students whom I served for the entire duration of their academic lives:

*“Living in Baguio, holding a position of Hospital Administrator to two different provinces (Baguio and Nueva Vizcaya) and taking up Master of Hospital Administration at UPOU Manila LC will not be easy without the help of our LC Coordinator, Miss Linda Manarin.*

*From enrolment to graduation, Ma’am Linda was always there to assist me. When frustrations beset me, while I was struggling to accomplish all requirements needed and at the same time taking up the responsibilities of the position I was in. . . a push and words of encouragement were always ready at hand. She was just a call or text away when questions and difficulties arise.*

*I was blessed to have her as a guide as well when time and demands were not easy to meet. She served as an available and generous center of communication to reach my professors as a distance learning student so I get the right direction to pursue and persevere!*

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1 Bachelor of Arts in Multimedia Studies

2 Master of Hospital Administration

*To top it all, though the whole learning process was a real struggle, it was challenging and fruitful because I was not alone in my learning curve journey – the UPOU LC Coordinator was my companion in this educational path and I am truly grateful for everything that made me accomplished my studies for the mission I am entrusted in our congregation’s health care ministry. Ma’am Linda was not just a LC Coordinator, She is a Friend!”*

During the time when we still had our once a month face-to-face study sessions, I hopped from classroom to classroom and even sat with the students in their classes to make sure that all the students’ and faculty’s needs were immediately attended to. When they had assignment deadlines, I was there to receive their assignments even beyond my office hours. Responding to student emails in a personalized manner was also one that we LC Coordinators practice since we know students appreciate it more that way. This is clearly verbalized through one of the statements of our students:

*“She has this one-on-one ‘personalized approach’ of dealing with the students, which is beneficial to us as students and in the promotion of the University’s standards and expectations.*

*Whenever I have questions, for instance, in the delivery of student/course materials and other school-related activities, she promptly responded to me through all means of communication, be it email, text messages, and telephone calls ensuring that I got the message in real time.”*

From the time the students hand me their application forms to the time they graduate, from a plain and simple coordinator-student relationship, I believe that a special bond developed among us -- FRIENDSHIP. Sometimes I cannot help but think if I did the right thing or if I spoon-fed and spoiled them. Questions like these kept popping in my mind, but I realized I did the right thing. I know I did those things for them. The Learning Center was there for them. As long as what I do help the students achieve their goals as learners, I see no reason to stop.

## **Understanding Students’ Needs**

One time, I was talking to a student, and she narrated how her mother felt so appreciative of us when they came to the Learning Center several

years ago to submit her application for admission. According to her, the way they were received and treated, how graciously they were directed to the nearest bank to pay the application fee, and so on and so forth, made them feel welcome, comfortable, and relaxed. Those were random gestures. I didn't even think that we were helping them that time.

In some other cases, students would approach me, confused whether to stop or continue on with their program. A little push and some words of encouragement made them continue. That was really something for me – thinking that I made them decide to continue with their studies was already an achievement. There were also students in the Learning Center who needed special assistance. An adult learner, a senior citizen at that, used to come to the Learning Center for assistance in using his new laptop. He came to the office once a week on a regular basis because according to him, he could do his assignments better with tutors around. We also had a physically-disabled undergraduate student at the LC Manila. She could walk but she could not write using her hand. She used her foot instead when writing. I proctored her separately because she took her exams on our sofa. Unfortunately, I never thought of taking a picture of her while taking her exams. Another case of special attention given to physically-disabled students was recounted by Atty. Irene Valones, one of our MPH<sup>1</sup> graduates, as she wrote,

*“..when I have exams to be taken at the Manila Learning Center, she made sure that the facilities are accessible without me having to climb stairs since I walk through crutches.”*

For students with unusual behavior, extra caution was given in order to prevent them from distracting other students especially during examinations. For comprehensive examination takers, special services were provided like serving them with coffee, tea or juice while taking their exams.

## **Reaching Out to Students**

More than serving as a venue for student activities, the LC Manila was a witness to the students' personal and academic accomplishments. We were their source of encouragement and inspiration as well as provider of strength and moral support.

<sup>1</sup> Master of Public Health

Ms. Riell said:

*“I am really grateful for Ms. Linda for being the good facilitator that she is, helping make sure that all I had to worry about was learning and producing good course work. Now that I am exploring opportunities to further my studies, I automatically asked her for letters of recommendation since I feel that through our interactions, we have gotten to know each other and that I have come to gain her trust in my capabilities as a student. I am especially appreciative of how excited and supportive she has been with what comes next in my studies.”*

Atty. Valones likewise said:

*“I am truly happy for having such a wonderful, accommodating, approachable and competent Manila Learning Coordinator Ma’am Linda Manarin. She is an instrument for making my student life from admission to graduation successful. Her kind assistance and helping hand does not end even after I graduated from the University. She readily and wholeheartedly dedicated time and effort in providing unending assistance to all my requests for diploma, transcript of records and other documents, which she likely do the same to other students.”*

As a LC Coordinator, it gives me a sense of pride and satisfaction when I see the students under LC Manila graduate. It pleases me more if they graduate with honors. And this has happened several times already. Moreover, what is most heartwarming is the fact that graduation does not break the link the LC Manila has with the students. The friendship is maintained after graduation. Memories will always be cherished and treasured. And with that, I want them to remember LC Manila as the Learning Center that cares, listens, and touches lives. The Learning Center with a heart.



# More Than A Building

Ma. Edelina Ong Yap<sup>1</sup>

I am Ma. Edelina Ong Yap, Coordinator in LC Iloilo, and I would like to share with you my own appreciation of the UP Open University's investments in distance education that go way beyond mere financial investments. I would like to discuss in this narrative the time and effort the UP Open University and we, LC Coordinators, dedicate when it comes to supporting and reaching out to the students of the University, and how these sometimes require sacrifices on our part.

## **The Learning Center Iloilo**

On November 16, 1996, I was hired by the UP Open University as the first full-time support staff of the LC Iloilo (then called School for Distance Education Visayas or SDEV during the SDE set-up) under the OVCSSS. At that time, the LC Iloilo was managed by a LC Coordinator and a support staff.

The LC Iloilo was established in 1995 and was temporarily located at the Professional Education Division (Prof. Ed.) office of UP Visayas. Many types of students often came to the Learning Center. Most of them were information-seeking, goal-oriented, and persistent. According to Ms. Gemma Magpusao, former Administrative Assistant at SDEV, the Learning Center was the venue where students met with their fellow distance education students and tutors or faculty-in-charge (FIC).

According to Dr. Aurora Fe C. Bautista, then Dean and Chairperson of the Prof. Ed. Office of UP Visayas, the DE students eventually grew in number hence the LC Iloilo needed bigger space. More importantly, she added that there was a need for the LC Iloilo to establish an identity because back then, it was being confused to be under the Prof. Ed. office of UP

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<sup>1</sup> Coordinator, LC Iloilo

Visayas. With the help of the UP Visayas community which was then under the chancellorship of the late Dr. Arsenio S. Camacho, the LC Iloilo was provided with an office located at the former UP Visayas Student Lounge Building. The Learning Center was located there until 2013.

On January 10, 2013, Dr. Melinda Lumanta<sup>1</sup> and Engr. Cenen Miranda<sup>2</sup> visited the LC Iloilo to initiate the plan to renovate the office. With the full support of UP Visayas Iloilo officials, namely Chancellor Rommel A. Espinosa, Vice Chancellor Encarnacion Emilia S. Yap, Vice Chancellor Nestor G. Yunque, and Vice Chancellor Evelyn T. Belleza, the plan to renovate the Learning Center was easily materialized. The LC Iloilo became the first Learning Center to undergo renovation.



The Learning Center Iloilo

The renovated LC Iloilo provides more space for accessible learning and new facilities like free Wifi connection and Mac desktops. Beyond improvement of its physical environment, the LC Iloilo has become a better venue for students to realize their dreams of learning. It has become a place where students regularly meet with their fellow students and share their experiences on how they cope with and survive life as distance learners who are simultaneously working and raising families.

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<sup>1</sup> Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, UP Open University

<sup>2</sup> Consultant for Infrastructure, UP Open University

## **Being part of a team: the UPOU Team.**

The UP Open University offers its students more than just a physical venue and quality education. With my 21 years of working for the UP Open University, I could say that the University has spent more than just its financial and physical resources for its students; it is also giving its students the best service it could give through its dedicated staff.

When I first joined the UP Open University, I was overwhelmed with the thought that I will be part of the team that will facilitate learning among UP students in an unconventional way. I felt challenged with the thought that the team will deal with different types of learners who have a common intention: to learn and academically accomplish something from the UP Open University. What energizes me each day is the joy of being able to selflessly contribute to the big thing that the UP Open University has been dreaming for: honor and excellence through open and distance learning.

Looking back, my tasks were to assist the LC Coordinator during face-to-face study sessions, facilitate examinations, distribute learning package materials, and attend to the administrative work at the Learning Center. Students received important reminders through announcements made over radio programs and snail mail. Those were the years when email, text messaging, and social media like Twitter and Facebook were not yet accessible to the masses. Nevertheless, tasks were accomplished no matter how difficult they were because we were made to think that as a team, we had to do things promptly.

## **Being part of the team means being open to changes**

At the UP Open University, various strategies have been introduced, replaced, and reintroduced as a way to innovate and keep up with the needs of the learners. As part of the team, we are constantly reminded to become facilitators of change and to become responsive and relevant to the needs of the University and its students. Through the years, as we continued to facilitate learning, we, the LC Coordinators, were being empowered by the UP Open University through regular trainings and re-trainings. Learning Center staff from Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao regularly attend the UP Open University's training on the operation of Learning Centers. During these occasions, we get the chance to see our

fellow Coordinators who are equally committed to make a difference in the field of distance learning.



LC Coordinators during a workshop in Tagaytay in August 2015

When teleconferencing was introduced in the First Semester of AY 1998-1999 as an alternative to the face-to-face tutorial session, the team needed to learn how to operate the teleconference equipment and even served as moderators between the students and the faculty tutors. We accommodated the students who regularly visited the nearest Learning Center office to attend their teletutorial sessions. They had their study session with their respective faculty tutors through teleconferencing equipment instead of a classroom setting.

In AY 2001-2002 when the Integrated Virtual Learning Environment (IVLE) was introduced, the members of the team were all trained on how to operate the IVLE and were challenged to improve their ways in teaching students how to attend online classes. Since we are a team, our officemates from the UPOU Headquarters were generous enough to share with us what they knew about IVLE. On my part, I conducted hands-on IVLE tutorials at the Learning Center to help students get familiar with the new learning environment.

Further, being part of the UP Open University team requires not only openness to new knowledge and new possibilities, but also dedication and initiative. In March 2004 after the UP Open University underwent a major reorganization, I was transferred from the Iloilo City Campus to the UP Cebu College in Cebu City. Hesitant to leave my hometown, I was tempted to leave the UP Open University back then. However, upon realizing that I am part of a team and that this is my way to give back to the university, I decided to stay.

My transfer meant personal sacrifices. Aside from being away from home, I had to strive harder to make my salary meet my basic needs. Also, as an Ilongga, I needed to learn the language of Cebu to be able to answer inquiries of Cebuano-speaking clients and students of LC Cebu. I was sustained, however, by the lessons my grandparents taught me – to work hard and to work harder; to learn and to unlearn (if needed); to share and to share more; to love and to live; to be happy; and to hold on to God at all times.

On November 2007, I got reassigned back to LC Iloilo. From there, I continued to perform my usual tasks as LC Coordinator. I also got to engage myself in different activities outside the Learning Center that helped me discover new things about myself.

### **Being part of the team had priceless rewards, too.**

Working with the UP Open University helped me grow professionally and personally. I have learned that giving one's best could help make the impossible most possible. In my almost two decades of working with the UP Open University, I have not only provided but also gained experience and knowledge.

When the Integrated Virtual Learning Environment (IVLE) shifted to Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (MOODLE) in the First Semester of AY 2004-2005, I decided to apply and enrol for the non-degree program under the Professional Teaching Certificate (PTC) so that I could get a first-hand experience on being in an online class. The experience gave me the confidence as support staff in giving basic instructions to students who have inquiries regarding their online class. My big smile at LC Cebu was when we had a 58-year-old student who enrolled under the Associate in Arts (AA) program. She was honest to tell

us that she did not know how to use the computer, but expressed her willingness to learn. That was enough reason on my part to give my extra time to teach her how to operate the computer. We started with the basics from introducing the parts of the computer, and how to switch the hardware on and off. I was happy to see her learn more every day as she took baby steps towards her dream of accomplishing the program she wanted to have from the UP Open University.

Being away from home in 2004 to 2007, I enrolled in Personal Entrepreneurial Development (PED) and the New Enterprise Planning (NEP) to redirect my mind into something other than work. As a requirement in NEP, I made a souvenir of a graduate doll of UP which was inspired by an environment-friendly project made from scraps of cloth of sablay and cloth from wedding/dress shops. UP Visayas Chancellor's Committee on Culture and the Arts supported my project and I got the chance to be invited to have my month-long Bayo-Bayo nga Hablon - A Dolls' Dresses Exhibit in 2010 (during Art's Month celebration) and another month-long Bayo-Bayo nga Hablon - A Dolls' Dresses Exhibit 2 in 2011 at the UP Visayas Art Gallery. My project was featured in an ABS-CBN Morning Show and also in local newspapers/fashion magazines because of my innovative advocacy in environment. At present, as a gift to UP I had turned over 16 pieces of my dolls, including the graduate doll of UP, dressed in hablon (a locally woven cloth) at the Center for West Visayan Studies Museum, UP Visayas, Iloilo City.

My doll project was not the only affirmation of my artistic inclination. It was followed in 2011 when the UP Open University launched its First Photo Competition with the theme – "Life at UPOU" – on the 28th of February I submitted two (2) entries, both of which were recognized: the Boundless Learning entry, awarded as the grand prize winner, and 25th and 8th Hour of Learning, honorable mention prize winner. It was fulfilling to be able to send the message to the public what the UP Open University is all about.

By working with the UP Open University, I have grown professionally and personally, and I have gained as well as provided. Indeed, the presence of the Learning Centers across the country has become a symbol of dreams, hopes, and best intentions transformed to realities.

# University Within Reach

Glenda L. del Socorro<sup>1</sup>

I am Glenda del Socorro, Coordinator in LC Davao, and this is my story. With the LC Davao being the only UP Open University Learning Center which is not housed in a UP campus, I would like to discuss in this narrative how the LC Davao has put in efforts to make itself accessible not only to its students, but also to the community.

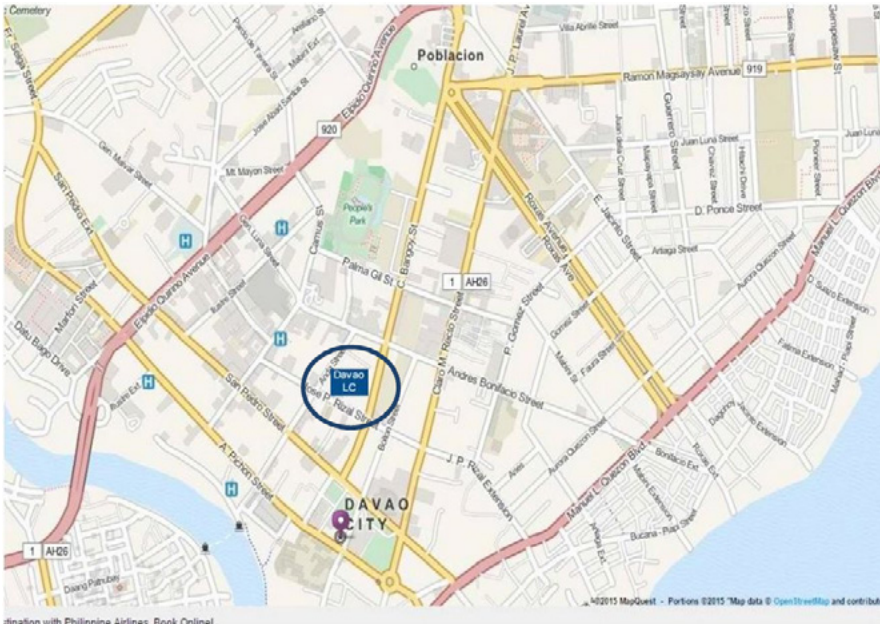
The UP Open University and UP Mindanao were both established in February 1995. It was so timely that when the Davao LC (UPOU Mindanao Learning Center, as it was called at the time because of the School for Distance Education set-up) was instituted, UP Mindanao was there to support its establishment. For several years LC Davao subrented with UP Mindanao. This was also the reason why the UP Open University LC Davao was usually mistaken to be a unit under UP Mindanao.

Ms. Nikki Philline dela Rosa, the first full-time LC Coordinator in LC Davao (see Appendix 4), narrated the humble beginnings of the LC Davao in her article entitled, "The Making of A LC Coordinator," which was published in UPOU News Links' February 1999 issue. According to Ms. dela Rosa, before LC Davao got its own office, it was adopted by the Community Services Public Affairs (CSPA) office of UP Mindanao. Located in Ladislawa Village in Davao City, the LC Davao then had no telephone line, equipment, and even supplies. That was the situation in the Learning Center until such time that UP Mindanao provided a room for LC Davao which was shared with two other offices. According to Ms. dela Rosa, each Saturday was indeed a busy day because study sessions for students were conducted in two different locations: one was at UP Mindanao Ladislawa Village and another was at the main campus of UP Mindanao in Davao City.

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<sup>1</sup> Coordinator, LC Davao

When the UP Mindanao Ladislawa Village was moved to Terraza Milesa Building in Davao City, UP Mindanao provided the UP Open University with a space exclusive for the LC Davao. However, in 2011, the School of Management of UP Mindanao was moved to its main campus at Bago Oshiro. Due to accessibility problems in the new site, the LC Davao decided to stay in the Terraza Milesa Building. It was an ideal location for a Learning Center because it was in the heart of Davao City, and was near government and private offices.



Location Map of LC Davao

## Making UP Open University Within People’s Reach

It was in 2007 when I joined UP Open University under contracted service. At that time, the task seemed somewhat threatening to me because I was concerned about my being a full-time mother and that a huge percent of my job required online knowledge. Despite these worries, I took the challenge and slowly got used to my everyday tasks as an LC Coordinator. By 2009, I became a casual employee when Ms. Maria Pilar Defenio left her post as LC Coordinator.

During the time I joined the UP Open University, Second Semester of AY 2006-2007, there were only 80 students enrolled in LC Davao. Most of them were from different parts of Southern Mindanao since that time, there were still existing Learning Centers in the northern and central parts of Mindanao (see Appendix 1). However, after the major reorganization, the Learning Centers in these provinces were converted into testing centers, leaving the LC Davao as the only Learning Center in Mindanao.

Handling of the testing centers was added to our tasks as LC Coordinators. I was coordinating not only with the students, but also with the proctors and administrators of the schools and institutions where the five testing centers were housed. In Figure 1, the number of enrolled students under LC Davao from AY 1995-1996 to AY 2015-2016 is shown. The green bars represent the number of students directly under LC Davao while the blue bars show the number of students directly under the five testing centers across Mindanao. As shown in the graph, only a few students were enrolled under the trimestral terms which included undergraduate programs and a few post-baccalaureate programs.

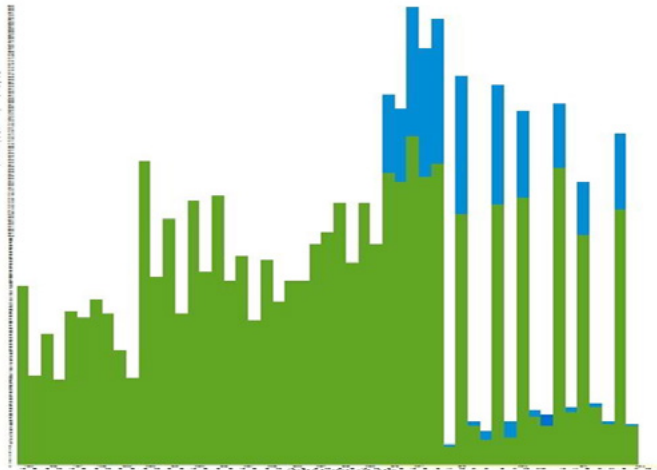


Figure 1. Number of Enrolees under LC Davao from Academic Year 1995-1996 to 2015-2016

## A Learning Center Not Bound by Space and Time

As a coordinator, my early years in UP Open University gave me a different

experience. I got to know the students by name since every one of them must come to the Learning Center to register, to pick up their printed modules, to take examinations, to submit their requirements and to conduct other transactions. However, as the years passed and the digital age continued to advance, the UP Open University kept seeking new trends in ODeL. Soon enough, student transactions such as registration, general orientation, distribution of learning modules and submission of assignments were all done online. Only in few courses were there proctored examinations. This resulted in reduced number of students coming to the Learning Center, making the office a lonely place to stay in.

Since most of the activities were being done online, every day I would receive a bulk of emails from students and individuals who had concerns regarding the UP Open University. Every day, I needed to attend to emails or else they would pile up. I was fully aware that as a LC Coordinator, my service was not bound by the 8AM-5PM working hours. For us LC Coordinators, receiving text messages from students as early as 5:00 AM and as late as 11:00 PM was not unusual. There were even times when I was tempted not to respond to them, but because I knew that most of these students were busy people who held high positions in their respective work or businesses, I willed myself to extend extra kindness and attend to their concerns even if it meant doing my job beyond my regular working hours.

I have solicited words from several students and alumni of LC Davao. Mervin Jay Suaybaguio, a government employee, was able to finish three programs in the UP Open University in just five years. According to him,

*“My UP Open University life was meaningful, fruitful and full of excitement. Every transaction I had with the LC Coordinator in Davao was smooth sailing... She listens attentively to our concern that is why she can always provide us win-win solution. She lets us feel that everyone in UP Open University is special because she always shows what respect really means. I am a proud graduate of UP Open University. Prouder to be from UP Mindanao-LC. Proudest to have the best LC Coordinator”.*

I am a bit skeptical to include the statement of Mr Suaybaguio in this paper at first, but I believe his is just some of the common sentiments coming from the students and guests who have experienced the kind of

service offered in the Learning Centers. As an LC Coordinator, it is heartwarming to know that I have been of help to the students when it came to their pursuit of quality education at the UP Open University. Treating people “fairly and of great importance,” as mentioned by Mr. Suaybagoio, is the culture I have noticed in the UP Open University.

## **UP Open University Programs Within Reach**

In my years of staying with the UP Open University, I have also witnessed how much the University has exerted its efforts in making its programs more accessible to the people in the community. I still remember when I first joined the UP Open University in 2007, there was only one undergraduate program, nine post-baccalaureate diploma programs, nine master’s degree programs, one doctorate program, and nine non-formal courses. All of these programs at that time were being delivered through blended mode: online using the Integrated Virtual Learning Environment (IVLE) and monthly face-to-face sessions.

When the learning management system shifted to MOODLE in 2008, the number of face-to-face sessions slowly dwindled until eventually, they were no longer implemented. Programs started to become more open and accessible to students as all were now being offered online. The UP Open University also extended its reach to the community as it started offering free online schooling through its MOOCs programs. At present, the UP Open University is offering three undergraduate programs, ten post-baccalaureate Diploma programs, twelve master’s degree programs, two doctorate programs, and thirteen non-formal courses. This increase in the number of program offerings has resulted in increased enrolment in the University.

Queenie Nunez, a current student under the Bachelor of Arts in Multimedia and an Associate in Arts graduate of the UP Open University expressed her gratitude for the chance given to her to pursue college education despite her need to start working at seventeen years old. She says the UP Open University paved the way towards her obtaining a degree with a simple flick of the Internet switch. “As a current student who became part of this digitized education system I am truly glad to be part of a state-of-the-art university that provides quality distance education to learners. UP Open University has given her the opportunity to work while studying anytime, anywhere,” Queenie said.

## **Open Learning in the Future**

Working at the UP Open University is a privilege. In my years of staying with the University, I have witnessed its efforts in promoting openness in education through its initiatives. From its highly dedicated and flexible staff to its continuously evolving system that adapts to changes in society and technology, the UP Open University is indeed an open university that caters to the needs of the students. However, as it is evident that the role of the Learning Centers is no longer exactly the same as before, I think that transforming the Learning Centers by opening them up to the community will be a great opportunity for the University. In this sense, the UP Open University and the Learning Centers will not only get to serve the students and its prospective applicants, but also the community in general. This, for me, is the next generation of open learning.

# Going Global

Ronelyn R. Marasigan<sup>1</sup>

My name is Ronelyn Marasigan, Coordinator for the Virtual Learning Center (VLC). Unlike the other Learning Centers that cater to students in the Philippines, the VLC reaches out to students overseas. With this come the challenges of performing my tasks as VLC Coordinator. Hence, in this narrative, I would like to capture the dimensions that I need to consider before dealing with students and agencies overseas as well as discuss how the VLC has been conceptualized and run by UPOU.

Offshore enrolment of the UP Open University students started in First Semester of AY 2003-2004. There were four enrolled students in different programs: Master of Arts in Nursing (MAN), Master of Distance Education (MDE), and Master of Information System (MIS). Enrolment in the other programs of the UP Open University increased in the succeeding semesters. By First Semester of AY 2006-2007, the number of enrolled offshore students rose to 134. Come First Semester of AY 2011-2012, the number grew to 395, which was almost a 300% increase within five years.

Due to the upsurge in the number of offshore students, the UP Open University established the VLC to cater to the needs of its overseas clients. All transactions and procedures made in the VLC were mostly conducted and communicated online. Being assigned as Coordinator of the VLC since 2011 (see Appendix 5), I am the one who coordinates and arranges examinations, and also the one who responds to academic and administrative concerns of offshore students.

When it comes to support concerning the learning management system (LMS) and course management system (CMS), it is outside the jurisdiction of the VLC. Student concerns related to LMS and CMS are instead relayed by the VLC to the concerned UP Open University offices and vice versa.

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<sup>1</sup> Coordinator, Virtual Learning Center

## Enrolment

Enrolment in UP Open University is purely online. We have the Online Registration System (ORS) wherein students will have to follow five easy steps to enrol, including paying tuition fees. Students will just have to login to the Student Portal and select the courses. The system will automatically display the assessment of fees once courses are selected.

Offshore students have several options when paying their tuition fees. They could pay through any Philippine National Bank (PNB) branch, bank transfer, remittance centers, and cash payments at the Cash Office in the UP Open University Headquarters. To be able to complete the registration procedures, students have to upload a scanned copy or digital image of their payment slip. They also have the option to pay the tuition fees directly in ORS using their credit cards. After the students have successfully enrolled online, they will receive an enrolment confirmation via email. It contains the students' enrolled courses, application for ID, options on how to avail themselves of the instructional materials and textbooks, directions on how to access the My Portal course sites with login credentials, and procedures on how to acquire a UPOU email account.

## Examination

There are two ways by which proctored exams at the UP Open University are administered: through an accredited testing center (in the case of offshore students, testing centers are usually at the Philippine Embassies or Philippine Consulates) with a designated proctor or examiner, or through online examination which follows a set of procedures to ensure the integrity of the examination process. Figure 1 shows the examination process practiced in the VLC.

To fully strengthen the UP Open University's commitment in serving students around the world, the University has signed a Memorandum of Agreement with the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA). In the agreement, the DFA would act as a cooperating institution by providing and assisting the UP Open University in establishing testing centers in its Philippine Embassies and Consulates in countries where there are UP Open University students.

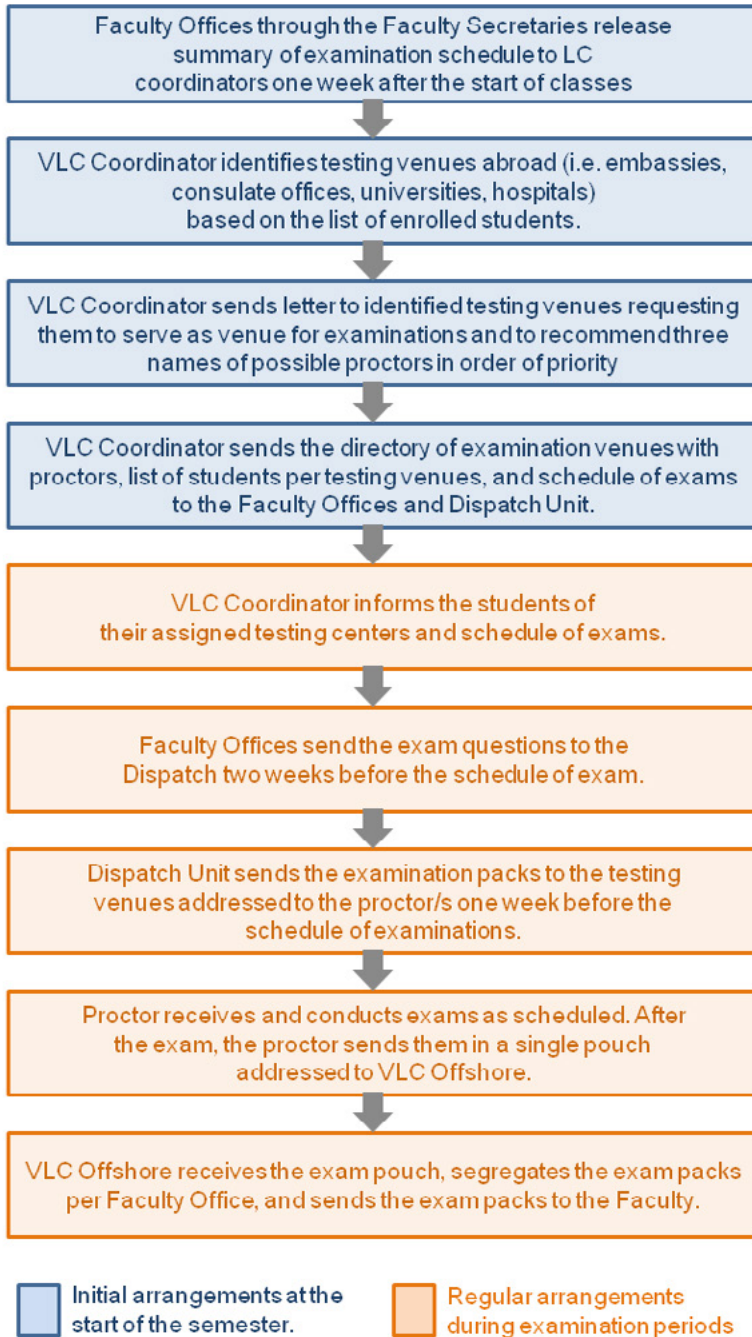


Figure 1. Virtual Learning Center Examination Flow Chart  
(Source: Alvie Simonette Alip, OVCAA – UPOU)

At present, we have approval on different locations in 33 countries. The testing centers are located in 40 Philippine Embassies/Consulates, 5 schools, and 1 hospital. In some locations where there were no Philippine Embassies/Consulates, we opted to administer the exams in reputable schools or hospitals that are accessible to students. Tables 1 and 2 show the list of Philippine Embassies, Philippine Consulates, schools, and hospitals abroad where the UP Open University has testing centers.

<b>EMBASSIES AND CONSULATES</b>	
<b>PHILIPPINE EMBASSIES</b>	<b>PHILIPPINE CONSULATES</b>
Bahrain	Toronto, Canada
Brunei	Vancouver, Canada
Berlin, Germany	Hong Kong
Tel-Aviv, Israel	Milan, Italy
Jakarta, Indonesia	Naples, Italy
Tokyo, Japan	Osaka, Japan
Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	Jeddah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Seoul, Korea	Pohnpei, Micronesia
Kuwait	Macau
London	Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	Barcelona, Spain
The Hague, The Netherlands	Dubai, United Arab Emirates
Nigeria	Los Angeles, United States of America
Muscat, Oman	San Francisco, United States of America
Moresby, Papua New Guinea	Chicago Illinois, United States of America
Doha, Qatar	Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam
Madrid, Spain	Guangzhou, China
Berne, Switzerland	Xiamen, China
Bangkok, Thailand	Shanghai, China
Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates	
Washington DC, United States of America	

Table 1. List of Philippine Embassies and Philippine Consulates where UP Open University has testing centers

SCHOOLS	HOSPITAL
Addis Abba University in Ethiopia	Shaukat Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital and Research Centre in Pakistan
Philippine International School in Assir, Khamis, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	
International Philippine School in Al – Khobar, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	
Academia Sinica in Taipei, Taiwan	
Hope Alive Foundation in Chang Mai, Thailand	

Table 2. List of schools and hospitals abroad where UP Open University has testing centers

A second option for students is to take an online exam. However, students are only allowed to take an online exam if they have a valid reason. Some of the valid and acceptable reasons are: if there are no embassies in the countries where they are based or if the embassies are far from their location; if they cannot leave their posts due to work, family, sickness, or security reasons; and if they are not allowed to leave their work station and travel without companions.

There are two types of online examinations for virtual students: 1) online exam through My Portal to be administered by the faculty-in-charge, or 2) online exam to be administered by the VLC. My Portal is the virtual classroom where all online discussions are held, including the submission of assignments. Meanwhile, the online exam administered by the VLC is administered with an external webcam.

### **Uniqueness of Virtual Learning Center Offshore Students**

According to Alip and Yambao (2011), although the offshore students basically share the same personal circumstances with students in the Philippines, what makes their situations unique is that they are in countries (host countries) different from their education provider's country (home country). For some offshore students, they have to take into consideration their host country's culture and tradition while studying. Some cases include: the work schedule of the offshore students are in conflict with

the Saturday examination schedule of the UP Open University; the day-off of some offshore students fall either on a Thursday or Friday; the national holidays or observances of festivals and religious activities in the host countries are in conflict with the examination schedule; or the time zones in the host countries are different from the home country. These are only some of the considerations that the VLC and faculty-in-charge have to mull over when dealing with offshore students. Hence being a VLC Coordinator and a faculty-in-charge requires flexibility and understanding when it comes to such cases wherein classes and examination schedules conflict with events in the students' host countries.

Nevertheless, with the fact that UP is a regional and global institution, UP Open University is still able to respond to the growing demands for quality education even in areas which do not have a UP campus through the VLC.

# Reconceptualizing the Learning Center System: From Centers to Hubs

Melinda F. Lumanta<sup>1</sup>, Joane V. Serrano<sup>2</sup>,  
Yasele Irene Angela M. Yambao<sup>3</sup>, and Mary Aizel C. Dolom<sup>4</sup>

Over the course of more than two decades, the UP Open University evolved from an institution that was primarily print-based in its delivery mode to an institution delivering its courses through the affordances of modern information and communication technologies (ICTs). The move from Generation 1 to Generation 5 (Alfonso, 2015) in terms of pedagogical and technological advancements necessitated institutional self-reflection particularly with respect to student support services and instructional delivery.

Towards this end, a workshop was conducted in order to elicit the collective view and thoughts of those involved in student support services. Results of the workshop and the recent breakthroughs in ICT revealed the realities of the time: advances in elearning, increasing mobility of learners, growing diversity of learning needs as well as the new realities in education brought about by new learning models such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). It therefore behooves the UP Open University to rethink many of its services. Learning is being redefined continually by developments in technology and society, and the UP Open University must adapt to these changes to live up to its role of providing leadership in the development of Open and Distance Learning in the Philippines.

Moreover, with the UP Open University's leadership role as cited in the

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2 Director, Information Office and Multimedia Center, UP Open University

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Philippines' Open Distance Learning Act (RA10650), it is imperative for the University to provide the scaffolds upon which other institutions may base their own decisions. In this section we hope to articulate some of the salient issues which may serve as guideposts towards reconceptualizing student support services through the Learning Center set up amid internal and external changes in the organization. By examining the existing geographically-based structure of Learning Centers and situating the UP Open University among other similar institutions, we can determine gaps that need to be addressed in terms of support services. Given its being an Open and Distance eLearning (ODEL) institution, we can then identify the unique features of UP Open University that could be addressed by an alternative structure, perhaps that of a hub configuration.

Like most open universities, the UP Open University, established in 1995, adopted an organizational set up that addressed student support services through a defined network of Learning Centers. These services were in the form of conducting tutorials, practical classes, or examinations; distributing materials or modules; providing library services; hosting student activities or initiatives; promoting academic programs; or providing admission and administrative services, which require students to visit the centers. However, with advances in ICTs, students are now provided with flexible alternatives in availing some of these services. For instance, with online registration and examinations in place, students no longer need to be physically present at the centers. Also, with the digitization of learning materials, students can now access modules from the comfort of their homes or elsewhere.

With these developments in the nature of student support services, the way these services are delivered also changed, requiring a rethinking of student support systems in the Learning Centers. For instance, with a streamlined process of receiving application forms, assignments, and notifications from students, the LC Coordinators can now redirect their focus on activities that aid in creating an environment for enhanced learning. As learning is now more about collaboration among different actors, creating an environment wherein the students interact not just with the university, but also with other sectors of society such as non-government organizations, higher education institutions, industries, and government agencies could add value to enhanced learning.

Currently, there is a growing number of open and distance learning institutions using online modes of teaching with geographically-based

Learning Centers delivering academic and/or administrative support. Open Universities in some countries maintain physical centers, variously called as Regional Centers, Study Centers, or Teaching Centers, stationed across provinces, districts, or states that serve the main purpose of providing student and faculty support. There are also those that are now using the full potential of ICTs in distance learning as they deliver both their teaching and support services online. These Open Universities deliver ICT modes of student support through: online, print, or digitized materials; tutors who can be contacted online, by email, or by phone; a specialist student support team that is allocated for each subject area; or an online environment where students and faculty members can access course materials and video-taped lectures, participate in interactive learning activities and discussion boards, provide feedback, submit assignments, and interact through video conferencing or emails.

In the context of UP Open University, the affordances of ICTs in promoting Open and Distance Learning are widely acknowledged. As an agile and ever-responsive institution, UP Open University continually redefines its pedagogical structure and keeping it in line with the developments in technology and society (Lumanta, 2014). After a decade of using print-based learning resources with face-to-face tutorials, UP Open University shifted to a fully online mode of teaching (Lumanta & Alip, 2014). Most of the University's academic and administrative support services are now offered online, with the development of online support platforms such as My Portal, eUP, faculty-based record systems, Online Exam System, Student Portal, and UPOU Networks, to name a few. Such developments in the University's operational system are also the reasons for the continuous reconceptualization of the University's Learning Center set-up, which has evolved from the 28 regionally-based Learning Centers in 1998 (Appendix 1) to the current seven Learning Centers stationed at UP constituent units across the country and a Virtual Learning Center providing support to its overseas students.

In 2007 when UP Open University went fully online, corresponding conceptual and operational reorientation of systems and processes had to be initiated, triggering an institutional self-reflection. Amid this constant defining and redefining of its operational systems, UP Open University rationalized its strategic decisions by adopting an institutionally and collectively developed worldview. Known as the ODeL framework, this worldview guided UP Open University in pursuing its strategic directions, including the provision of student support services.

Figure 1 presents the elements of the ODeL framework (Alfonso & Garcia, 2014). With social transformation through education as its end goal, it is interesting to note that the realities of a digital and networked environment bears upon and is influenced by the University's values or ethos.

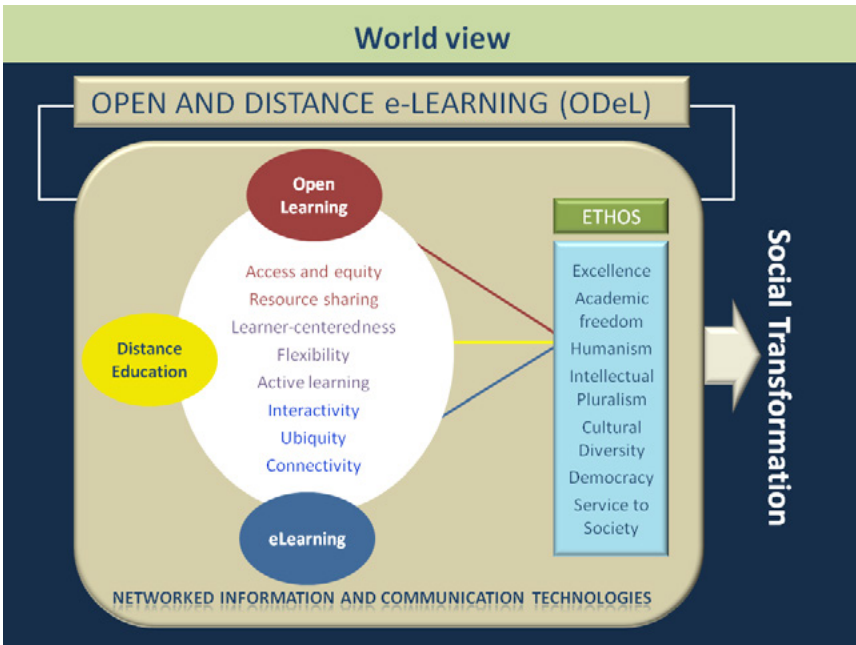


Figure 1. Open and Distance eLearning Worldview (source: Alfonso & Garcia, 2014)

The UP Open University's unique position as an ODeL institution gives the University an advantage when it comes to exploring wider opportunities in distance education. As all of the University's academic support services and most of its administrative support services are now accessible online, it is imperative for the University to look into a possible reconfiguration of its Learning Center set-up to take advantage of the affordances of a digitized and connected environment.

With the combined affordances of open learning, distance education and elearning, such as flexibility, connectivity, access, and ubiquity, online students rely less on services delivered on a face-to-face basis, resulting in a redefinition of the roles of the LC Coordinators. While these changes

are inevitable and are largely expected in a technologically changing environment, the University values of academic excellence, cultural diversity, intellectual pluralism, humanism, to name four, remain fundamental and have to be upheld. Hence, the role of the LC Coordinators should be seen to be one of expansion rather than minimization in such reconceptualization.

Results of the workshop showed that the LC Coordinators no longer need to intervene in the process of receiving payments, application forms, assignments, and other documents as all of these are now automated. The roles of the Coordinators have been refocused on coordinating inquiries with the concerned offices, making examination arrangements, and doing administrative work, among others. With automation, the Coordinators have ample time to engage in other activities that will support the learning experience of the students.

Changes in roles should likewise be accompanied by an appropriate change in structure. On the premise of expanded roles for the service provider and of greater self-direction for the service receiver, the structure should be expansive as well while allowing for collaboration and productive interaction between and among its entities.

In the context of student support for enhanced learning, we venture to conceptualize an institutional configuration that allows for 21st century learning as reflected in Figure 2. The P21 framework discusses the interconnection between skills, knowledge and expertise of students with the necessary support systems such as standards, assessments, curriculum and instruction, professional development and learning environments in order for a 21st century graduate to succeed and be prepared for work and life in the new millenium.

In this framework, the skills, knowledge, and expertise of students do not only include mastery of key subjects but also understanding of academic content and focus on creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. The framework also includes critical thinking skills in information, media and technology, life and career skills, and social and cross-cultural skills. The support systems need to provide critical systems to guarantee student mastery of the skills. In terms of standards, students should be engaged in the real world and actively participate in solving relevant problems and in comprehending knowledge. Providing high quality standardized assessment, feedback on student performance and

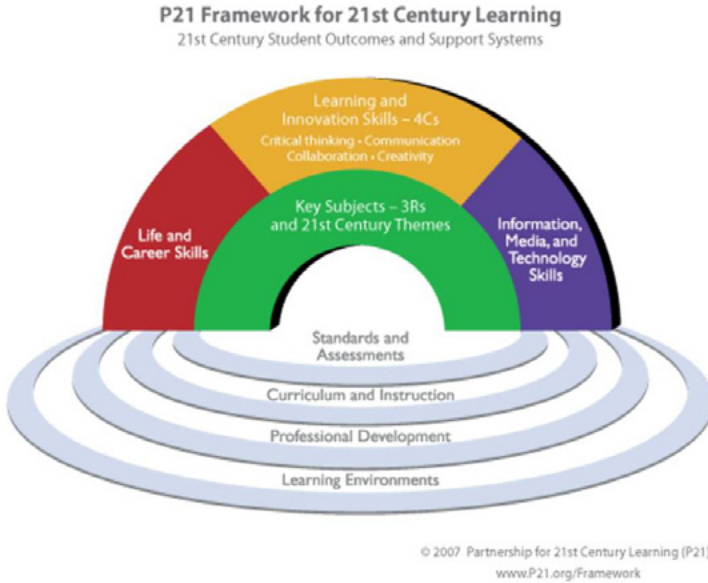


Figure 2. P21 Framework for 21st Century Learning  
(directly lifted from: <http://www.p21.org/our-work/p21-framework>)

balance measures to assess the educational system's effectiveness is another support system that will definitely contribute to student's performance in this setting. In curriculum and instruction, students should be given innovative teaching and learning methods through the use of technologies and higher order thinking skills. The learning environment needs to create learning practices and human support in order to assist in teaching and learning. These learning communities will enable students to collaborate and contribute their best practices. These will also include extended support in terms of involvement to and from the community either locally and internationally.

Using this 21st century learning framework, most of the existing support systems of the UP Open University may need to adjust accordingly in order to attain the needed skills, knowledge and expertise of students. Creating a nurturing learning environment necessarily takes into account the interrelatedness of various sectors in a given physical or virtual space. The Center concept then becomes insufficient in addressing the complexities presented by the new configuration. Conceptually, a Center is the point from which an activity or process is directed or focused. In the context of distance education, a Learning Center is a physical unit within a college or university that is established to focus on providing all

sorts of academic or administrative support to students and faculty members. Learning Centers, in particular, are based on the philosophy of “individualized learning” (Bennie, 1977) and refer to “the place where distance learners apply, register, attend study sessions, meet with tutors and fellow learners, submit assignments, and take exams” (Alip, 2002, p. 35).

Many of the principles and approaches of Open Education are incorporated in the concept of Learning Centers (Bernie, 1977). Open Education highly suggests that spatial organization of the learning environment has great influence on learning enhancement (Bernie, 1977). Its emphasis is on the design of the instructional environment and on the manner by which learners interact with and respond to it. However, because of external realities that continuously transform Open and Distance Education, the Learning Centers’ limiting concept of a physical space may no longer fully aid in learning enhancement as it did before. The trend in distance learning has now transitioned from a “highly competitive focus” to “greater collaboration and teamwork skills” (Bonk, 2009). Through the years, online learning success has grown to become dependent on communication, collaboration, and conversation, with advanced technological tools such as mobile phones, email, Web conferencing, Voice Over Internet Protocol, and the Internet serving as their key drivers (Bonk, 2009).

These changes in the trend of Open and Distance Learning could only be fully utilized by the institution through a more flexible design that recognizes the valuable contribution of advanced technologies to learning. To achieve this, the UP Open University must adapt a structure that allows its learners to interact not just with the university, but also with the external environment through various means of communication and institutional arrangement.

An alternative approach would be to consider a configuration similar to that of a center with spokes connecting critical nodes in a physical or virtual space. This set-up accommodates the complexity and openness of learning. Under this model, the focal hub serves as the effective center of an activity, region, or network that has a set of spokes that connect to a specific set of activities, services, and similar and/or complementary organizations. Figure 3 attempts to represent such configuration.

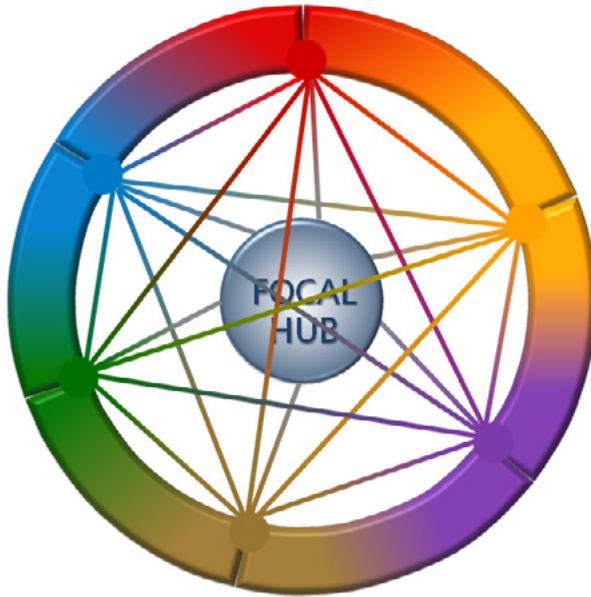


Figure 3. Hub and Spokes Framework

In terms of structure, a focal hub is still a physical space, but unlike a center, a hub makes use of various technological platforms such as the Internet and virtual media to connect and interact with its spokes. The external environment, on the other hand, may or may not be physical in nature and may also interact with one another without the intervention of the hub.

The hub design may be beneficial to a distance learning institution such as the UP Open University as it provides more avenues to enhance learning by strengthening the University's relationship with parts of its external environment: students, faculty members, Philippine and foreign higher education institutions, government agencies, industries, and non-government organizations. Such structure also enables the University to effectively perform its responsibilities under the Open Distance Learning Act which deems the institution responsible in providing and sharing its expertise on Open and Distance Learning through collaborations with various higher education institutions and government agencies.

Through this alternative structure, the UP Open University's commitment

to enhanced learning is concretized. It allows the University to better cope with changes in its environment, particularly with the recent breakthroughs in ICT, advances in elearning, increasing mobility of learners, growing diversity of learning needs, and emerging new realities in education. Although this structure still does not fully address gaps in distance learning in terms of the social and human aspects of learning, reconceptualizing the Learning Center set-up into a hub concept opens new opportunities for the UP Open University to grow and further explore possibilities in ODeL.



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## Appendix 1. Classification of Learning Centers and their Dates of Establishment

<b>Classification of Learning Centers</b>	<b>Learning Centers</b>	<b>Semester Established</b>
Government Agency	Cagayan de Oro - DECS	1st Semester 1996
	Cagayan de Oro - DOH	1st Semester 1996
Private School	Collegio de Sta. Isabel	1st Semester 1997
	Emilio Aguinaldo College	2nd Semester 1997
	Notre Dame of Marbel University	1st Semester 1998
	University of San Carlos	1st Semester 1996
	Urios College	1st Semester 1997
Public High School	Batanes National High School	1st Semester 1996
	Quezon National High School	1st Semester 1996
	Sipocot National High School	1st Semester 1996
	Valencia High School	1st Semester 1996
Non-government Organization	Hong Kong - Bayanihan Trust	November 1996
State University and Colleges	Cagayan State University	1st Semester 1994
	Catanduanes State Colleges	1st Semester 1992
	Davao Oriental State College of Science and Technology	1st Semester 1998
	Eastern Samar State College	1st Semester 1996
	Marinduque State College	2nd Semester 1997
	Palawan State University	1st Semester 1992
	University of Eastern Philippines	1st Semester 1994
University of Southeastern Philippines	1st Semester 1994	
State Universities and Colleges (UP Unit)	UP College Baguio	1st Semester 1995
	UP Cebu College	2nd Semester 1994
	UP Tacloban College	1st Semester 1996
	UP Diliman	2nd Semester 1994
	UP Los Baños	1st Semester 1988
	UP Manila	1st Semester 1995
	UP Mindanao	1st Semester 1995
	UP Visayas (Iloilo Campus)	2nd Semester 1995

## Appendix 2. List of Learning Centers and Coordinators in Luzon

<b>UPOU Learning Centers</b>	<b>Coordinators</b>
Batanes National High School	Mrs. Magdalena A. Siazon
Cagayan State University	Prof. Wilma L. Taguibao Prof. Ester Ramboanga
Catanduanes State Colleges	Dr. Asuncion V. San Juan Prof. Linda Talan
Colegio de Sta. Isabel	Mrs. Nenette L. Abrigo
Emilio Aguinaldo College	Dr. Ofelia G. Santos
Marinduque State College	Dr. Loreto D. Carandang Ms. Emma L. Cabildo
Palawan State University	Prof. Emma R. Suplido Dr. Erlinda A. Ganapin
Quezon National High School	Mrs. Leonisa F. Ariles
UP Baguio/ Baguio	Dr. Ma. Nela B. Florendo Prof. Rosemary Gutierrez Dr. Ofelia C. Giron Dr. Leticia E. Tolentino Ms. Geneva T. Simplina
UP Diliman/ Diliman	Dr. Adelina A. Barrion Dr. Felisa Añonuevo Mrs. Lizamarie C. Olegario Ms. Nikki Philline dela Rosa Mr. Arnie Trinidad Ms. Carlota T. Yoingco
UP Los Baños/ Headquarters, Laguna	Prof. Dulcinea R. Laforteza Ms. Joane V. Serrano Ms. Elvira R. Lalap
UP Manila/ Manila	Prof. Harry Engle Ms. Erlinda M. Manarin
Sipocot National High School	Mrs. Cynthia Candelaria
Sorsogon State College	Ms. Lydia A. Nato

### Appendix 3. List of Learning Centers and Coordinators in Visayas

<b>UPOU Learning Centers</b>	<b>Coordinators</b>
Eastern Samar State College	Dr. Leonor T. Obon
UP College Cebu/ Cebu	Dr. Primitivo G. Ereno Mrs. Arleen M. Tampus
UP Tacloban College	Prof. Merlie Alunan
UP Visayas- Iloilo/ Iloilo	Dr. Mildred J. Gonzales Dr. Bella Grace L. Legayada Mrs. Imelda B. Valera Ms. Edelina O. Yap
University of Eastern Philippines	Ms. Jenny Abalon Dr. Mindanilla B. Broto
University of San Carlos	Dr. Montana Saniel Fr. Florencio L. Lagura, SVD Dr. Elenita C. Basilgo Ms. Jocelyn Locaylocay
Valencia High School	Mrs. Maria V. Catalbas

## Appendix 4. List of Learning Centers and Coordinators in Mindanao

<b>UPOU Learning Centers</b>	<b>Coordinators</b>
Davao Oriental State College of Science and Technology	Ms. Gegenia Lavizures Mrs. Erlinda Patosa
DECS/ Dep. Ed. -Cagayan de Oro	Dr. Lucio Parantar Dr. Mario A. Basalo Ms. Nonita M. Macalla
DECS/Dep. Ed. -Misamis Occ.	Mrs. Fe I. Nery
DOH-Cagayan de Oro	Mrs. Nelly S. Sabio
Lourdes College	Dr. Judith C. Chavez
Notre Dame of Marbel University	Dr. Estela J. Barietta
UP Mindanao/Davao	Ms. Nikki Philline dela Rosa Ms. Ma. Pilar C. Defenio Ms. Glenda L. Del Socorro
University of Southeastern Philippines	Dr. Cesar M. Limbaga
Urios College	Dr. Wilma B. Balmocena Prof. Vivian D. Otaza Prf. Arlyn Floreta Dr. Pelagia Joven

## Appendix 5. List of Learning Centers (Virtual and Abroad) and their Coordinators

<b>UPOU Learning Centers</b>	<b>Coordinators</b>
<b>Abroad</b>	
Bayanihan Center - Mongkok, Kowloon	Ms. Lorna Villanueva Ms. Bing M. Parentilla
<b>Virtual Learning Centers</b>	
Virtual Learning Center for Local-Based Students	Ms. Ronelyn R. Marasigan
Virtual Learning Center for Offshore Students	Ms. Alvie Simonette Q. Alip Ms. Yasele Irene Angela M. Yambao Ms. Elinor T. Lopez Ms. Ronelyn R. Marasigan



# About the Contributors

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**Erlinda M. Manarin** is currently the coordinator for UP Open University Learning Center Manila and is a University Extension Associate under the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs. Before she joined UP Open University in 1995, Erlinda was a Research Assistant in several foreign-funded projects of the Department of Health and College of Public Health in UP Manila and has worked as Research Associate in the Distance Education Program of the College of Public Health. She graduated in 1984 from Perpetual Help College of Laguna with a BSc Economics degree.

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**Melinda F. Lumanta** is the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs of the UP Open University. She had also served as Vice Chancellor for Finance and Administration, Dean, and Program Coordinator at the same university and is a UP faculty with areas of expertise in communication theory and research, organization and management, and knowledge management. She holds a PhD in Communication from Michigan State University.

**Joane V. Serrano** is the Director of the Information Office and Multimedia Center in UP Open University and is an Associate Professor I of the Faculty of Management and Development Studies in the same university. She obtained her BS in Development Communication degree from UP Los Baños and has finished her Master of Management Major in Development Management and Doctor of Philosophy Major in Development Communication from the same university. Her areas of expertise are communication of scientific and technical information, environmental advocacy, and socio-cultural principles of human-environment interactions.

