

HEADING TO HANDS: DECODING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES IN COMMUNITY EXTENSION PROGRAM AMONG UNIT LEADERS IN SELECT PHILIPPINE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (PHEIS)

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ABSTRACT

Community Extension is one of the trifocal functions of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) together with instructions and research. It is the arm of the university that helps communities in learning new knowledge and skills that they can use to improve the quality of life. Extension unit heads/leaders are regular faculty members that has been appointed or designated to lead the community extension program for the university or college. Their task is to plan, implement and assess extension programs for quality and sustainability. Community Extension, as the term suggest, have many elements that intersects one another that disturbs its processes, thus affecting the objectives of the program. Therefore, understanding the experiences of community extension unit heads/leaders will show us a full picture of the intricacy in managing change. This study aimed at describing the lived experiences community extension program among unit leaders in select Philippine higher education institutions (HEI's) using the transcendental phenomenology. Results revealed that there are specific leadership competencies needed to successfully manage community extension. Such competencies are: Intrinsic qualities (dedication, passion, commitment and heart), educational competencies, intercultural competencies and dependability. Extension managers also encountered challenges in budget management, teaching load assignment, quality of extension program, policies, procedures and processes, evaluation, and positive and negative attitudes of faculty towards extension program. Community extension heads/leaders managed the demands through time management, use of right tools to understand the community, using positive feedbacks form participants as motivation, influencing others, and constant communication.

Keywords: Community Extension, Leadership, Qualities, Education, Management.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions play a pivotal role in the transformation of communities and poverty alleviation. Universities and colleges in the Philippines are commissioned to help the government improve the standard of living of its citizens through knowledge management. The primary mission of extension is to develop, design, and evaluate educational programming that meets the needs of youths, families, and communities (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2016). It is known for creating educational environments conducive to the transformative learning required for people to change their perspectives and make better decisions in their lives (Franz et al., 2018). Thus, making community extension as a valuable mechanism in fighting poverty that leads to transformational change of communities. Community extension as the terms imply

is a complicated system that is highly susceptible to change due to the interplay of different elements in the conduct of an activity. An example of these elements is; tools, (expertise, knowledge, funds, equipment, training, etc.), rules (specific guidelines, university processes, government policies), division of labor (different nature and level of tasks each subject is doing), and the community (everyone in the particular setting). There are many factors that contribute to the success of community extension program. Some of the most common examples are political system, competency of the personnel and their adequacy, training and retraining and the challenge of coping with modern technology through ICT. Argabright et al. (2019), identified 21st century competencies for extension professionals which include high-efficiency teamwork, connecting (systems thinking), convening, adaptability, problem solving, leading change, communication, relationship building, entrepreneurship, and confronting risk. In view of this multi-faceted system, extension professionals are at the center of this issues in community extension.

The success of community extension is heavily carried by extension professional's ability to manage change. According to the study of Suvedi and Kaplowitz (2016) program evaluation is a core competency needed by Extension agents. There are many misconceptions in evaluation that it is only done at the end of a program. In community extension, evaluation is done from beginning to end of the program, it's a continuous process that leads to a never-ending improvement. Another competency needed by 21st century extension leaders is the ability to engage the community or community engagement. According to Angima and Gaebel (2018) extension has to be successful in multidisciplinary effort involving students, faculty, and stakeholders in engaging communities as equal partners in determining issues and developing solutions. While Derindag (2016), identified common leadership behaviors like: considerate, facilitative, autocratic and participative leadership behaviors that supports the need for extension leaders to be more facilitative and participative in managing community base programs.

Extension program in the Philippines follows the same ideologies as extension programs in global scene. Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) providing extension services may share the same mandate, but delivery of extension program will vary from institutions to institutions. HEI's Community extension faces an unprecedented shakedown that posses' new challenges to programs, institutions, beneficiaries, and extension educators. To remain relevant, extension leaders has to build competencies that can adapt to the very dynamic needs of the community. Thus, there is a need to understand the phenomena from the people who are in the forefront of community extension. Although there are abundant researches about extension programs, most of it focuses on program impacts, effectiveness and new trends. There is few that made use of phenomenological research design to understand the lived experiences of community extension unit leaders in higher education institution. Therefore, the researcher undertakes this study with a view of understanding the lived experiences of community extension program unit leaders of select higher education institutions (HEI's) for the benefit of recognizing how these experiences unfold and contextualize it to help HEI's provide a highly meaningful and sustainable extension program for the community.

METHOD

To understand and interpret the rich experiences of unit leaders in community extension program from higher education institutions, this study utilized transcendental phenomenological research design. Transcendental phenomenology approach to qualitative research looks at the intrinsic structures of consciousness to discover the rich, deep, thick,

textured, insightful, and illuminative essence relative to such phenomenon (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). Primary sources of data were collected through in-depth interviews consisting of twelve (12) open ended questions pertaining to the structural nature (what) and twelve (12) pertaining to the textural nature (how) of their experiences as community extension unit leaders. The participants were selected using purposive sampling from three (3) State Universities and College (SUC) in the province of Laguna, Philippines. The researcher strictly followed formal stages of communication for ethical consideration and adherence to government health and safety protocols was ensured to protect the safety of the participants and the researcher as well.

RESULTS

In understanding the Lived Experiences in Community Extension Program Among Unit Leaders in Select Philippine Higher Education Institutions, the researcher classified Eight (8) overarching theme cluster and fifteen (15) sub-themes that were derived from the relevant statements and associated ideas of the participants.

As to the lived experience of Community Extension Program Among Unit Leaders

Theme 1. Qualities of Extension Leaders

In this Theme, the participants shared their different views of what personal and professional attributes should an extension leader/educator must possess.

Sub Theme 1.1 Intrinsic Qualities: According to the majority of the participants Passion, Dedication, Commitment and Heart is the main ingredients to success with regards to community extension. Majority of them see these qualities as essential to community extension and that without it, success of the program might be compromised. Commitment is a force that binds an individual with an organization and to exert extra effort on its behalf. This is shown in three (3) domains: affective, normative, and continuance; which reflect emotional ties, perceived obligation, and perceived costs in leaving the organization, respectively (Jaros, 2007 cited in Ravelo & Intong, 2020). According to Perez and Junsay (2016), the psychographics such as professional qualifications, commitment, job satisfaction, motivation, personal differences, and perceived fairness in management are factors that greatly affect faculty performance. Results indicated that the extension workers who are highly committed to their organization were most likely to produce better job performance compared to less committed ones.

Sub Theme 1.2 Educational Competencies: Other extension leaders gave more weight on professional attributes to be the basic qualifications to manage extension programs. They stressed that managing extension program requires many technical skills and having such background would be an advantage in carrying out these tasks. In the study done by Warner et al., (2016) community extension leadership competencies identified specific competencies needed to apply social marketing, includes (a) Personal attributes; (b) Knowledge and understanding; (c) Research and analysis; (d) Communication; (e) Leadership; (f) Professionalism and ethics; (g) Program-planning, implementation, and evaluation; and (h) System thinking.

Sub Theme 1.3 Intercultural Competencies: The rest of participants prioritized intercultural competencies in managing diverse communities to be the important quality in managing change. Theses managers believe that education, training and intrinsic qualities are also

important qualities, however, for them, community orientation is a prerequisite in managing community extension. Moncloa et al., (2019) argued that professionals in extension organizations who develop intercultural competence will be better prepared to address the needs of multicultural populations and create learning environments that are characterized by belonging and inclusion. McKee and Bruce, (2019) supports this finding and identified other skill that community extension leaders must possess to reach out to a diverse participant are; attending to self-awareness, communicating inclusive intensions, and considers the structural concept of a program.

Sub Theme 1.4 Dependability: Here, the participants expressed a leadership quality that reflects someone who can deliver. This quality is seen as important due to the number of functions a faculty is playing and also required to fulfill. Being able to deliver is an advantage due to the multi-layer of responsibilities and accountabilities of government offices.

Theme 2: The hurdles. Factors that affect community extension

In this theme, the participants identified problems that they perceive greatly affects the conduct of an extension program. These perceived factors are like hurdles in the day to day hassles of faculty extensionist. Here the participants transparently identified the difficulties they have encountered in the availability or use of fund, managing their schedules, appropriateness of extension activity and its impact to its beneficiaries.

Sub Theme 2.1. Money makes the world go round: In this theme participants expressed their personal experiences regarding budgetary constraint. They openly shared their everyday predicament on where to get expenses that was incurred in a day of processing and preparing the extension activity. Due to the unpredictable schedule of the community, they are unable to process and request funds and opted to use their personal money and reimburse it later. This problem in funding is shown in the study of made by Medina (20019) mentioned in most cases, SUCs, allot a low budget for extension PAPs. Oftentimes, SUC's extension budget gets realigned to make way for research or other projects. In effect, it leaves them a low working budget for the program and members of the extension team are forced to use their own money to sustain their efforts.

Sub Theme 2.2. Overloading: Here participants shared their difficulty in balancing their roles in the university. Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) in the Philippines is mandated to play four interrelated functions of Instruction, Research, Extension and Production. Since mobilizing the community requires longer time to organize, it affects scheduled plans for the other functions. In a study conducted by Mojares and Baconguis (2015) they mentioned that the schedules of personnel affect the conduct of extension as it is conducted over and above the teaching load. The most common problem related to is the conflict of time between teaching, doing research and conducting extension. This was also cited by Struckmeyer et al., (2019) stating that staff shortages, program prioritization, challenges in developing an audience, and communication issues with the program team made it difficult for educators to engage with the program.

Sub Theme 2.3. Short Term Extension Program: In this theme, the participants commonly shared their perception on the quality of extension service they provide to their community. HEI's in the Philippines are evaluated and monitored with regards to the number participants they reach and the quality extension activities they made. These statements of the participants describe that the activities made are short term and to satisfy the government requirements. In

the study of Agsalda et al., (2016) faculty personnel, usually perceive extension activities as either demand driven or accreditation driven. In effect, this perception leads to short term activities that lack sustainability and meaning to the beneficiaries. While Smalkoski et al., (2016) identified community engagement and relationship-building approaches implemented over relatively longer periods of time. This strategy produces more sustainable, more focus and authentic activity by directing all efforts in a specific area in the community.

Sub Theme 2.4. Policies, Procedures and Process: Participants identified policies, procedures and processes that play a significant factor in the success of community extension. Due to the rigidity of the processes involved, it often takes a long and exhausting process before an activity is approved. In the process, community extension heads and their members lose motivation, eventually leading to non-continuance of the program. According to Mojares, (2015) a significant factor that is worth considering is the absence of a clear common mandate for extension service. This sends a message that among different institutions that extension service is a less priority program compared to research and instruction. According to one participant, there are actually no clear policies and guidelines that made their work difficult, in effect, many extension personnel lose motivations.

Sub Theme 2.5. The Evaluation Process: Maybe one of the most underrated and taken for granted area in community extension is the evaluation process. As in any program or activity, evaluation is the tool that will provide you with information if you have met your goals and objectives. Likewise, it will show you how you and your team performed, show you what works well and what things need to be improved. More importantly, it will show if you have made an impact with your target beneficiaries. In this theme, participants expressed that evaluation results are not thoroughly analyzed. The evaluation material, somehow has a mismatch with the participant. In the study conducted by Jayaratne, (2016) it was mentioned that extension educators tend to pay more attention to program planning and delivery than to evaluation. In effect, participants at the end of the activity tend to neglect the evaluation therefore, giving inconsistent and unreliable data.

Theme 3. Faces of Community Extension

In this theme participants identified attitudes of extension members that they encounter in conducting community extension. These are behaviors and attitudes of their colleagues that is supposed to be their partners in this program. Grouping their responses, showed positive, negative and the ideal traits they observed.

Sub Theme 3.1 Supportive and Participative: This sub theme describes those faculty members that are very supportive in their college's extension activity. The participants also said that they enjoyed working with these people that has this kind of working attitude. Their team members are very cooperative, they work in harmony and they do not come into conflict with one another. According to Guiron et al., (2019) found the level of participation of the respondents towards community extension activities is affected by the attitudes towards community involvement and it is highly dependent on many factors such as: education related activities, health and nutrition, livelihood, ecological and environmental balance.

Sub Theme 3.2 Unsupportive and Non-participative: In this theme, participants identified some characteristics of their colleagues that are unsupportive and non-productive in community work. Some of the members show unmotivated behavior that manifest by being uncooperative. Having community extension members with this kind of behavior becomes an additional

burden to the one leading the program. Behaviors are fueled by motivation, for these members they have their own reason. While negative attitudes towards community extension can be crippling, it can be attributed to the level of commitment of the person. According to Ravelo and Intong, (2020) commitment is a force that binds an individual with an organization and to exert extra effort on its behalf and is shown in three (3) domains: affective, normative, and continuance; which reflect emotional ties, perceived obligation, and perceived costs in leaving the organization, respectively.

As to How do the participants face the demands of being unit heads of community extension programs of HEI's in the Province of Laguna

Theme 4: Time Management

In this theme, community extension leaders shared how they managed their very demanding role as community extension unit head. Their shared experiences show how they prioritize their classes over other responsibility. They see the big picture, shows consistency and persistence, they prioritize, plan ahead, shows efficiency and commitment in what they do. Community extension managers are always on top of the situation. They handle foreseen problems in advance and make unconventional solutions to conventional day to day challenges. According to Kniffin and Patterson (2019) the nature of 21st century challenges and the trend in leadership theory suggests that more people must become engaged in their communities to address challenges.

Theme 5. Understanding the Needs of the Community

What surfaced in this theme was community extension unit heads practices Community Needs Assessment (CNA) or Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). CNA or PRA are the initial step in the conceptualization of an extension program. This process is very important primarily because this is an actual visit in the target community where you get to interact with people who live there and understand their needs in real living conditions. Likewise, this process helps in gathering data, identifying priorities and resources. This also plays an imperative role in achieving sustainable and high impact extension program for the community. Alam and Ishan (2012) as cited by Mustanir and Barisan, (2017) said that Participatory Rural appraisal (PRA) is the most suitable and appropriate method to identify the existing situation of the community. Doing PRA gives community extensionist help in understanding the community better than what is seen. Codamon-Dugyon (2016), her study revealed the need for an integrated extension project package to be developed and carried out based on the assessed community needs in order to have greater impact. Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) are in the best position to help the country alleviate poverty driven communities through transfer of knowledge and skills. But, if we wish to be responsive and provide sustainable and high impact community extension program, there is a need to consolidate our efforts and partner with other members of the community.

Theme 6: Positive Feedback

In this theme intrinsic motivation was like a gasoline that keeps the motor running. With all the hard work and challenges each extension unit put into a community activity, hearing positive feedbacks from the beneficiaries all it takes to pave the difficulties away. Presenting a clear objectives and intensions makes a lasting relationship between the HEI and the community. When there is a good relationship, it also produces quality and meaningful

extension program. In a study conducted by Rubio et al., (2016), they identified four benefits to extensionist and their beneficiaries of engaging in community extension. First is benefit in terms of recognition and participation; second, is benefit in terms of personality; third is through social awareness and lastly, benefits in terms of unity. Participation is an act of recognition. When we recognize people or institution for their contribution to the community, we create a relationship and become part of our social responsibility and their personality. Feedback whether positive or negative is communicating what you feel and shows social awareness.

Theme 7: Passing The Light To Others

In this theme participants shared how they influence others to be part and engage in community extension. One of the objectives of community extension is to get as much adapters, this also includes members of the team. College community extension is composed of a diverse faculty with different understanding and appreciation of community work, it is like a community within a community.

Sub Theme 7.1. Experiential Strategy: Here extension unit leaders engaged the members in a learning process. Letting the extension members have their hands on the activity to reflect on their experiences. Using this strategy, members of the extension team are able to connect and validate their perception.

Sub Theme 7.2. Modeling Leadership: Here extension heads used modeling as a strategy for his/her colleagues to imitate what he/she is doing to encourage faculty to participate.

Sub Theme 7.3. Targeting Goals: Here, unit heads give the extension members a goal to target as a motivational object. Participation in extension activities are used by the university as reference for faculty promotion. In these responses, the extension unit head gives reminder to keep the commitment of the members stronger.

Sub Theme 7.4. Direct to the Point: Here community extension leaders directly remind the members of their duties and responsibilities as faculty and as an extensionist. One of the most overlooked leadership skills is the role of an experienced leader in attracting new ones. In the study of Penrose (2017), he mentioned that leaders' roles can influence potential newcomers with whom we have contact by presenting a positive attitude, conveying positive aspects of our jobs and the organization, and emphasizing the positive interactions we have with extension clientele and our coworkers. In another study by Seger and Hill (2019) they mentioned in their study "the future extension leadership is soft leadership", that leaders must be adept at communicating, proactive while quick to respond, and willing to create a flattened organizational structure that encourages creativity and innovation from the bottom up.

Theme 8: Constant Communication

In this theme, participants shared their best practices to keep the highest possible standards for their institutions. In the participants experiences, it is evident that institutions are distinct with other institutions. They mentioned different ways of how to manage information, and what actions they made base on these results. More importantly, they do this to improve the quality of what they do and take pride in do so. In this generation, information is as important as the product itself. To remain relevant, we as facilitators of change must continuously communicate with all stakeholders involve in community extension. According to Schauber & Castania,

(2001) as cited by McKee and Bruce, (2019) in their study *Creating Inclusive Extension Program*, it is essential that Extension professionals have open lines of communication directed at meeting the needs of all people. It is very important for a dynamic program such as community extension to constantly communicate with all the people involve to have an informed decision, let them know their roles and expectations, and become comfortable in giving feedback. Dialogues is another way of communicating complex issues in a diverse setting like the community. In the study of Doll et al., (2018) recognizes the effectiveness of dialogue with stakeholders as it helps in addressing complex topics. It successfully brought down barriers in communication and facilitated cooperation among all.

CONCLUSION

The consensual statements of the participants point to three major factors that encapsulates the dynamic experiences in the life of a community extension unit head in Higher Education Institutions. These are: 1) The competencies extension leaders that highlight and describe intrinsic qualities, educational and intercultural competencies, and dependability, 2) Problems or challenges they encounter every day that affect community extension, 3) Faces in community extension that describes the behavior and attitudes of community extension personnel. Community extension leaders require several qualities and skills needed in managing a demanding task such as community extension. These qualities include intrinsic qualities, educational competencies, intercultural competencies, and dependability. Likewise, one has to be a good problem solver and possess a supportive and participative attitude. As to how community extension leaders face with the demands of being unit heads of community extension programs of HEI, it was shown that there are several qualities and skills needed in managing a demanding task such as community extension.

One of the most important skill that community extension unit head/leaders must poses is time management. Basic as it may sound, but time management entails personal commitment and more importantly it creates a mindset that focuses on achieving your priorities, goals and objectives. Having an understanding of the needs of the community is also important to an extension unit head to ensure that the community is being provided a program that is tailored to their needs. Motivation from positive feedbacks that they get from beneficiaries are also a source of strength for community extension unit heads. These words of appreciation feed their soul and creates a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction. Attracting future extensionist and influencing others is a must for all community extension unit heads. This ensures the continuity of the program transferring these knowledge, skills and attitude to the next leaders. And lastly, extension unit heads must be good communicators. Communication empowers people, it helps us identify issues and solutions, and helps us arrive in a sound solution.

RECOMMENDATION

Understanding the lived experiences of community extension program unit leaders in select higher education institution cultivates a deeper understanding of this trend, together with direct and indirect observations with potential implications in community extension education. In this study, the research recommends Community extension is a very demanding task. It is highly recommended for institutions to prioritize the personal attributes, leadership and management skill when designating a community extension head/leader. It is also highly recommended for institutions to provide continuing education, trainings, workshops to community extension leaders to keep up with new trends and to stay relevant. Community extension is very unpredictable and demanding job. Higher Education Institutions should look into the

possibility of lessening the subject load of extension unit head to give ample time for preparation of documents and other community related processes. Lastly, Community extension is like a laboratory for all the knowledge that has been generated from all academic activities. It is but fair to give an equal amount of importance and increase the appropriations for community extension.

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