

The Institutional Identity Formation Process of Students : A Case in Laguna, Philippines

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Abstract :*Identity of an educational institution is best seen through its own students. Thus, the study set out to define the participants' concept of institutional identity and to determine the different manifestations of this identity. An interview was conducted with selected alumni of a private non-sectarian university who has been student leaders during their four years of stay in the University. Themes were derived from their narratives. The results yielded the following: the University's institutional identity refers to the embodiment of the virtues dictated by charity, empathy, as taught in the Catholic doctrine and who translate these virtues to tangible actions. There is a great value placed on Character building, a reflection of their strong ascription to familial identity and emphasis on their non-material culture.*

Key words :*institutional identity, identity formation in educational institutions, student's concepts of school identity*

Introduction

Identity, as a part of the non-material culture, carries many ideas about what constitutes a person, what makes that person a singular entity distinguishable from the rest. Thus, this has become a means to acknowledge one's presence in a seemingly similar crowd. Identity is also a powerful means of providing an identification that could be used by others to create expectations and narratives about a person or an organization. This is similar to identities generated by Organizations and institutions such as Schools and Universities.

As most Private Universities succeed in emphasizing the legacy of their names through billboards, banners, and other outdoor ads, only one core means can re-sound the identity it created --- the students.

De Wolff, de Ruyter, and Miedema (2003) describes the identity of a school as encapsulated in the physical and distinguishing features of the school and what members of the school have in common. These 'identifying features' transforms an individual from *lack of differentiation* to *becoming identified* with a specific community, organization, or groups (Kaplan, 1983; Ter Avest and Bakker, 2007). As further discussed by Wolff, the more articulated, shared, and discussed, the more they ascribe to what s true as members of a collective community.

This study aimed to explore the constructs of identity created among students who came from graduated from a non-sectarian private University. Specifically, it aims to determine the different definitions of the school identity and the different manifestations of these definitions. It thus sought to answer : *What is the university identity according to its alumni?*

Methodology

Locale and Participants

The participants of the study were AB Communication students who are alumni and former student body officers of a selected non-sectarian University located in Laguna, Philippines. They were selected because: 1) they have been active leaders and participants of school activities (academic organizational activities that involve other Colleges and Universities and internally organized institutional activities); 2) within these four years, the students were exposed to the Mission, Vision, and Values of the institution through courses that specifically discussed these concepts and activities that also promote these ideas; and 3) their program, Bachelor of Arts in Communication, is active in both curricular and extracurricular activities.

Key informant interviews were conducted with the five AB Communication alumni who were purposively chosen based on three criteria : Officer of two accredited University organizations including the newly established academic organization , has been exposed to or handled extracurricular projects of the department, and consistently participated (as volunteers) in the priority activities of the University. These criteria ensured that they would be knowledgeable about the concepts and contexts of the University's identity and that they would be able to share a vast array of narratives related to their perception regarding the focus of the study.

The Key informants were informed of the nature of the study and voluntarily agreed to become part of the research. Since there is a verbal agreement on the confidentiality as a premise of their participation, the name of the university which they

attended was not included in the whole study and the title of the courses they mentioned were changed.

Data Analysis

The narratives collected through the interview were transcribed. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes in the transcribed audio files. The themes were categorized. The text was read initially for emerging proto-themes wherein provisional titles and definitions were assigned. Second series of coding followed wherein initial themes were re-contextualized and categories were developed. Final themes were then constructed from these categories (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Framework

The study used the interpretive approach wherein the researcher attempted to understand the lived experiences of the research participants (Martin & Nakayama, 2012). To further guide the interpretation, the study also used the interpretive perspective as its lens in discussing and interpreting results of the study.

The Interpretive perspective stresses that identities are negotiated and co-created, reinforced and challenged through communication. These emerge when messages are exchanged. There are three ways that identities are communicated: through core symbols (cultural values), labels, and norms. Core Values are fundamental beliefs and central concepts that define a particular identity. Labels are terms that refer to a particular aspect of identities. Norms are behavior that are associated with specific identities (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005; Ting-Toomey, 2005).

In further defining the term Identity, the classification of Alan Roland was used. Roland (1988) identified three universal aspects of identity: individualized identity, familial identity and the spiritual identity. Individualized identity is characterized as independent and self-reliant. In contrast, familial identity is self as always connected to family and others. On the other hand, spiritual identity is identification with feelings of connectedness to others and higher meanings of life (Martin and Nakayama, 2010).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to Geertz (1973) “[Culture is] a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.” Here, the culture is situated as a meaning universe. In this premise, meaning is therefore created by those inside that universe. Using this premise, the institutional identity was explored through meanings formed among the participants as reflected through their narratives.

The discussion is divided to two parts: Result of the thematic analysis: the formation process of the institutional identity, the elements that constitute the institutional identity, and the construct of the participants about the institutional identity; and analysis of the themes based on the Interpretive perspective.

Formation process of the institutional identity

*‘Mula nung first year kami, tinuro na samin
yung mission vision. Lalo na sa Christian*

Living namin.’ (Participant 3)
(Since first year, they taught us the
Mission Vision, specially our
Christian Living* course)*

Based on the stories shared by the participants, they have undergone a process of assimilation wherein they were slowly introduced to the concepts of the University’s identity.

Knowledge and Awareness. The University, based on the participants has four Christian Living courses offered to First year and Second Year students. Aside from being introduced to Family values and virtues shaped by Catholic Doctrine, they are also oriented with the Vision, Mission, and Values (VMV) of the School. The VMV could focus on Character as the core ingredient of being a productive citizen of the country and the active creation of its future and a servant of God. Aside from these, visual reminders could also be seen around the campus to be further reminded of what the University is aiming to become.

Enrichment. Aside from Academic exposure to the thrusts of the *University*, the students are further involved in different outreach programs. There are two types of outreach programs under the department’s Community Outreach Department (COD)*: Regular programs done by the department and programs created by each of the Academic Departments. Students are involved in the execution of both programs of COD as volunteers and donors. Students are also familiar with the partner communities and public schools of the University.

Initiative/Practice. The third phase of the assimilation process seals the practice of corporal works of mercy through the Students direct involvement in the conceptualization and execution of their own COD programs. These programs are only monitored by the department upon their submission of the proposed program but all the other necessities and components of the created outreach program are done by the students. An example of this is the annual Reading Campaign Project (RPC)* of the AB Communication students wherein they promote love for reading and donate books to the class library of the 1st graders of the target Elementary school.

Elements of the University’s identity

Virtue. According to the participants, there are two virtues that they associate to the institutional identity: *matulungin* (helpfulness) and *pagiging responsable* (a strong sense of responsibility). These values should be espoused as their core motivation for being *servants of God*. As participant 5 states :

*‘..Syempre dapat maging magalang, responsable.’
(We have to be respectful and responsible)*

Awareness. Perpetualites should be aware of both national and local social issues and societal problems. Aside from what they read from media and hear from the grapevine, they also conduct researches, surveys, and mini studies in order to fully grasp the nature and context of local issues, specifically those in their immediate community. To illustrate,

before they execute and create their plan for their *Reading Campaign Project (RPC)*, they first surveyed their target audience to identify demographics and psychographics and to establish the audiences' specific needs related to the RPC.

Action. As stressed by Participant 4 and 2:

'... kung ano ung natututunan mo sa school ay naapply mo sa sarili mo...'
(*you should apply to yourself whatever you learn from school*)

'Every year nagkakaroon ng CO para isabuhay yung ibig sabihin ng servants of God'*
(*A student is involved in CO every year to embody the meaning of being servants of God**)

Students of the University are said to be translating the virtues and knowledge, which they have acquired about the societal and community issues (and the VMV), into actions. They should exemplify these through active participation and involvement in COP's and should also be personally living through the dictates of their virtues.

Constructs of the Institutional identity

Shared Values. Students of the University share a common string of values which they believe they should espouse : being helpful, God-loving, and respectful. These are the same values they were able to observe during the length of their stay in the institution. The students have undergone an assimilation process through the (almost) four years in the Institution

They were initially introduced to the concept through their Christian Living course wherein they were consistently taught the Mission and Vision of the school

Commitment to Social Action. For the participants, Social Action is a core driving force in their role as Helpers of God. they believe that involvement in activities such as different outreach programs of the COD. Although they may be incentives in the end (awards and recognition are given to the students by the COD) they believe that they do not involve themselves in these programs for the academic gains but for the mere satisfaction that they have helped others and are involved in worthwhile activities that bring about a certain degree of change in the lives of the people they have helped.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

Universal Identities

The University's identity adheres to two universal identities: the familial identity and the spiritual identity. Although among the two, they strongly ascribe to the familial identity. Here, they emphasize strong connections and interconnectedness with others. This, according to the participants, could also be observed in the community of the

University. They feel that they are a family. They also consider their department, the Communication department as a family working towards one goal. They practice extending both academic assistance and assigning and accepting activity work assignments as a part of their responsibility as a family/community member.

Communicated Culture

Core symbols. Helpfulness in terms of active participation in corporal acts of mercy is a core symbol of the Perpetualite identity. They are perceived as actors of change through sensitivity and acting upon the alleviation of the conditions of others who are not as fortunate as they are. These are seen through their community outreach projects. Aside from this, they are also keen on giving assistance through logistical and manpower needs in the different activities of the University and the student organizations. Another core symbol is their adherence to the practices of the Catholic Church. These are seen through their observance the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Holy Week, Mass in every first Friday of the month and every third Wednesday of the month, Feast of the Holy Spirit, Angelus and prayers before the start of class and every activity.

Labels. Participants, use the labels as terms to refer to themselves. These labels are further strengthened through their material culture: through the uniforms they wear and the specific colours that represent these concepts: red and gold. This is worn by everyone on a specific day.

Norms. Through core symbols, the participants express their identities in different practices. The familial identity is expressed through their active involvement and creation of outreach projects. Their spiritual identity is expressed through active involvement in the masses for the Catholic feasts and observation of the Angelus prayer every 12 noon and 6 pm. This is also expressed through the inclusion of CL courses which is also part of their academic requirements.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The study set out to define participants' concept of the institutional identity of the University which they attended and to determine the different manifestations of this identity. The results yielded the following: The University's institutional identity refers to the embodiment of the virtues dictated by charity, empathy, as taught in the Catholic doctrine and who translate these virtues to tangible actions. In turn, the manifestation of this meaning are through commitment to social action either through the outreach programs mandated by the University or through the ones initiated by the students themselves and the virtues they exhibit through their lives.

It could also be observed that there is an emphasis on Virtue than Academic excellence. The participants placed a greater value in character building, a reflection of their strong ascription to familial identity and emphasis on their non-material culture. They also believe that the University has indeed succeeded in molding their individual characters and contributed to their overall concept of themselves.

The ideas about the participants' institutional identity have established that they have a clear and unified concept of that identity. Still there is a need to replicate a similar

study involving all the other students of other Colleges and universities within the Province of Laguna, Philippines.

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