
State University Manila: Communicating in Times of Crisis

Sitting in her office overlooking the historic Pasig River on a humid Tuesday afternoon, Ana Gomez, information officer of the State University Manila (SUM) and head of the university's Public Affairs Office (PAO), closed her laptop for a while and focused her gaze on the still waters. She had been extremely busy since Monday morning. Tomorrow morning she would face SUM's executive committee to present her crisis communications plan.

How should SUM handle the media? What should the SUM community, including the Board of Regents, be told regarding the issues confronting the university? What immediate actions should the university administration take to manage the crisis? With a heavy sigh, she rested her tired eyes hoping that everything would work out for the best.

The Situation

Early yesterday, several members of the media were at the university's main gate trying to get in to interview the university president. SUM was in the news over the weekend because a janitor was allegedly assaulted on campus by a group of athletes and a university official. Protocol in the university

dictated that before the security office allowed any media to enter the campus, clearance would be granted by the PAO, which Gomez managed. Her media relations officer was about to fetch the media at the gate to escort them in, when she received orders from the president's office to turn them away. The university was opting to stay silent about the issue; interviews would not be granted to the media.

The media, however, did not go away. Instead they camped outside the gate waiting for university workers to leave the building.

On the same day at noon, a group of students held a rally, also at the gate. The local media had feasted on the event and other issues while SUM leadership remained silent. Enterprising journalists were able to get "unofficial" statements from members of the community including that of student leaders and the janitor who was allegedly roughed up.

The president called Gomez to his office. She saw the President seated at his desk holding the newspaper clippings of the day which were prepared regularly by the PAO. "Ma'am Ana, what should we do with these?" the president asked her, looking worried and disgusted with the negative news. "How should I explain this to the board of regents during our regular meeting on Thursday?"

Gomez replied, "With due respect to your earlier instruction, sir I think we should answer the media's queries immediately so that they will not turn to unofficial sources."

"Ms. Gomez, prepare a plan for my presentation to the executive committee tomorrow morning," the president instructed his information officer.

Background of the University

SUM was a state-funded higher education institution that had been in existence for years. It was governed by Republic Act 8292 known as the Higher Education Modernization Act of 1997, and its Implementing Rules and Regulations contained in the Commission on Higher Education Memorandum Circular No. 4, series 1997. It was one of the country's best educational institutions.

It had a student population of around 65,000, spread across its campuses in Luzon. The faculty force was composed of 1,400 full-time faculty members with around 600 part-time teachers, supported by more than 700 administrative employees.

As a state-funded institution, its students were often referred to as "iskolar ng bayan" (scholars of the nation). Aside from the quality of education that it offered, SUM was known for having a low tuition fee. It had been charging the same tuition for more than 30 years. A typical tuition fee for a semester was 1,500 pesos.

The administration was headed by a president, which under RA 8292 was chosen through a tedious selection process. He was aided by an executive vice president and supported by six vice presidents, namely for administration, academic affairs finance, research, extension, planning and development, and student and external affairs.

The president assumed office in May 2012 after he was proclaimed the winner over four others who vied for the presidency.

The 12th President and His Team

Dr. Eladio Dela Cruz, a faculty member from the philosophy department, was chosen among the five contenders who submitted their development plans to the search committee. After much deliberation and thorough review of their plans, including a public presentation to the community, Dela Cruz became the 12th president of SUM and the youngest president in the history of the university.

The newly-installed president immediately went to work and implemented changes in the university consistent with his vision to transform SUM into a “knowledge-producing community.”

Among his initial steps were an organizational restructuring, which would include rearranging the clustering of academic programs and initiating the vertical articulation of colleges. He also initiated a long overdue round of promotions for the faculty along with the hiring of new employees to fill in the casual plantilla.ⁱ

Transparency and accountability also became the central policy of the new administration. Several consultative dialogues were conducted to listen to SUM’s different sectors and to relay the vision and agenda of the president to his constituents.

The initial composition of the president’s executive team was the same as that of the previous administration. He did not replace them, although their posts were designations rather than plantilla positions. Only one vice president was holding a plantilla position. Thus, the executive committee was composed of veteran administrators in the university led by a young president. Five months into his presidency, one of the senior vice presidents retired and was replaced by a young college administrator. Toward the end of 2012, another vice president also reached the end of her government service. She was replaced by another young executive officer, a contemporary of the president during his student days at the university.

So into Dela Cruz’s first year in office as president, the university had at its helm a relatively young team of executive officials. The community initially saw this as a welcome change in what used to be traditional, bureaucratic management at the university. Innovations were introduced in the system to fast track transactions within SUM.

The Public Affairs Office

Part of the overall reorganization of the university’s structure was the redefinition of the role of the PAO. Under the reorganized PAO, the focus was on the internal and external stakeholders of the university. Unlike before, the PAO kept a balance between ensuring smooth information and communication flow inside the university as well as the flow of information and frequency of communication about the university to its external public.

The PAO had a media relations unit and a creative media group that took care of the online media. Gomez had a pool of experienced writers/editors with previous media practice. Gomez herself had been a radio reporter before her stint as a member of the university’s communication faculty. Upon the assumption of Dela Cruz to the president’s office, Gomez was made head of the PAO.

ⁱ Plantilla positions in the bureaucracy are permanent positions allotted to a particular agency. Anyone who holds a plantilla position enjoys all the benefits of a regular, permanent employee until his/her retirement.

To facilitate the flow of information in a large university like SUM, Gomez identified communication officers in each college, branch, and campus. In-house trainings were conducted to equip them with the necessary skills. The communication channels used by the institution were:

- Print (*SUM News*, a monthly newsletter)
- Official website and social media (Facebook and Twitter accounts), office memoranda (an electronic copy was uploaded regularly to the university website)
- Dialogues and sectoral meetings (aside from the regular academic council meetings held every end of the semester)

All these channels were maximized by the PAO to reach out to all sectors and to ensure transparency and a regular flow of information and communication. Relations with the press were also maintained through regular media releases, media interviews whenever necessary, and occasional exposure to and participation in media events such as coverage during the opening of classes, national programs like organ donation, and disaster preparedness drills. SUM's presence in the external community was felt through these activities, carrying the image of a public university with the lowest tuition fee yet offering quality education.

Traditionally, information flowed faster through the grapevine at the university. These were informal, unofficial sources that had access to what was happening inside the university. More often than not, information through the grapevine spread faster, but with modifications thus leading to misinformation and/or miscommunication. With the proactive and focused handling of communication within and outside the university by the PAO, grapevine communication was minimized. The monthly newsletter became a regular source of information and updates regarding achievements and developments in the university. The website was updated almost daily. Urgent announcements such as suspension of classes were simultaneously disseminated through the website, social media, and short messaging service.

Every member of the SUM community was happy and satisfied with the changes and positive developments that ensued in almost all aspects of the university's operations. Faculty members, administrative employees, and students were all in high spirits until this latest incident came up and was picked up by the media.

Violation of Human Rights?

"SUM, human rights violator?" This was the screaming headline carried by most newspapers over that fateful weekend before the school's opening. The late night newscasts also included a report on the complaint filed by a janitor of SUM who accused an official of the university of hitting him on the head after he was allegedly beat up by five people at the gymnasium. The social media carried photos of the injured janitor bearing several stitches on his head.

Based on the account of the janitor and other witnesses, the incident took place on a Friday night at the gymnasium where the official was playing basketball with guest athletes from another university. During a break, one of the guest players found his gym bag open and his cellphone missing.

The official upon hearing this, called the janitor who was stacking chairs near the bleachers and confronted him.

"Did you take the cellphone from his bag?" the SUM official shouted at the janitor.

“No sir, I don’t know what you are talking about,” replied the janitor, trembling. At this time, all the other athletes were gathered around him. When the janitor attempted to run away, the players ganged up on him and hit him. Struggling, he was able to escape and ran toward the gym’s entrance. But the official ordered the guards to hold him and he was brought back to where the official was standing. The said official allegedly hit the janitor hard on the head, and blood trickled down the janitor’s face. The group left the janitor in that condition. His fellow workers rushed to his side and brought him to the hospital. After he was treated, some colleagues advised him to report the incident to the police which he did.

And so from the police blotter, the media picked up the story and reporters feasted on it over the weekend. The SUM administration refused to comment on Monday — it was a complete nightmare for Gomez. It was the first day of the new school year and before the end of the week, the board of regents would meet. The press was still camped outside the university gate getting as much information as they could from those who were willing to be interviewed. Inside the campus, employees and faculty members were secretly sharing what they knew and what they got from media reports.

Gomez mulled over the crisis communication plan she would present to the university’s executive committee. How should SUM handle the media? What should the SUM community, including the Board of Regents, be told regarding the issues confronting the university? What immediate actions should the university administration take to manage the crisis? With these questions in mind, Gomez went back to work.