

Continuous Service Quality Enhancement: Prioritizing Frontline Services in the College of Education

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ABSTRACT:

One of the essential components of quality assurance initiatives in higher education institutions is continuous quality improvement. In identifying priority areas for service enhancement, utilizing stakeholders' feedback provides institutions with valuable empirical evidence and informs institutional decision-making processes. This study hoped to provide data-driven recommendations by identifying service dimensions that received comparatively lower satisfaction ratings for enhancing the quality of frontline services in the College of Education. A descriptive quantitative approach utilizing Cronin and Taylor's (1992) Performance-Only Service Quality Model (SERVPERF) was used for this research. The findings indicated all five areas of service provided by the university's front-line staff received positive responses from students. However, two specific areas (Medical-Dental Services and Guidance Services) produced lower-than-average student satisfaction ratings when compared to other services offered. Recommendations were developed using these data-driven results to provide continued improvements in service quality, increase access to services, improve responsiveness of services, and establish a method for regularly assessing stakeholder satisfaction. This research demonstrates the importance of an evidence-based approach to develop strategic institutional improvement initiatives and support excellent service practice within higher education.

Keywords: frontline services, service quality, SERVPERF, continuous quality improvement, higher education, student satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions operate in an increasingly dynamic and competitive environment that is shaped by globalization, higher accountability levels, and rising expectations from stakeholders. Institutions are thus constantly strengthening organizational performance and service delivery (Hazelkorn 2019; Stensaker et al. 2017). Against this backdrop, quality of education has broadened beyond focusing mainly on teaching and research to include efficient, responsive, and student-centered administrative and support services that play a big role in students' overall educational experiences (Ali et al. 2016a; El Alfy and Abukari 2020). Consequently, assurance of quality has become a strategic part of the management of higher education, stressing continuous monitoring, evaluation, and improvement of both academic and other services to ensure effectiveness and accountability (Cardoso et al. 2018; Elassy 2015). Empirical evidence also shows frontline and administrative service quality has a big impact on student satisfaction, image of the institution, trust and loyalty, and this highlights the importance of excelling at service to achieve institutional success (Douglas et al. 2015; Sultan and Wong 2019). Higher education institutions should regularly assess service quality and implement evidence-based initiatives for continuous improvement to meet the changing needs and expectations of key stakeholders (Prakash, 2018; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016).

Increased focus on service quality reflects broader transformation in higher education where students are increasingly recognized as key stakeholders whose experiences serve as important evidence of effectiveness and high performance (El Alfy and Abukari, 2020; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016). Consequently, higher education institutions are expected to show accountability, transparency, responsiveness, and continuous improvement through evidence-based decision-making, assurance of quality, and active engagement with stakeholders. Frontline support services such as registrar, accounting, cashier, library, guidance, medical dentistry, security, and dean's office services also play a critical role in shaping overall educational experiences, satisfaction, and perceptions of performance (Ali et al., 2016a; Douglas et al., 2015; Sultan and Wong, 2019).

Student satisfaction has become important because it measures how well support services respond to students' needs. Data on satisfaction provides administrators empirical information for assessing current practices, identifying opportunities for improvement, and informing strategic planning. Research has stressed that institutional support contributes to engagement and persistence (Tinto, 1994) and that interactions students have with the institutional environment also affect educational results (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005).

The current research is based in part on Cronin and Taylor's (Cronin & Taylor, 1992) Performance-Only Service Quality Model (SERVPERF). SERVPERF suggests that service quality can be best measured by assessing the performance as perceived by all those who are affected by the service. For example, in the field of higher education; SERVPERF provides a straightforward approach to assess frontline services due to the fact that students directly experience them throughout their time at an institution. As such, the evaluations from students provide relevant information about institutional strengths and areas for development.

From an administrative point of view, the results from assessments on the level of service quality can serve to provide institutions with information that may lead to their long-term planning, resource allocation, policy formulation, and ongoing quality enhancements (Elassy, 2015; Carney, 2022; OECD, 2019). Lower Satisfaction rates should not be viewed as failures by the institution. Instead, they should be recognized as potential areas of growth through both institutional learning and service delivery improvements (Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European higher education area (ESG) 2015; Sallis, 2014). As such, stakeholder input will become a valuable tool in assisting administrators with evidence-based governance and informed institutional decision-making (OECD, 2019; Fullan, 2020).

Despite many studies investigating service quality and student satisfaction in higher education, most have focused primarily on measuring perceptions and levels of satisfaction as indicators of institutional performance (Ali et al., 2016b; El Alfy and Abukari, 2020; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016). Fewer studies have stressed translating assessment results into priorities and continuous initiatives for quality service

(Elassy, 2015; Sultan and Wong, 2019). This study meets a practical need by showing how data on student satisfaction can identify high-priority areas for enhancement of service quality and support institutional decision-making.

College of Education at Central Mindanao University stands out as context worth looking at for service quality because of its strong commitment to becoming a Center of Excellence (COE) in teacher education. Becoming a COE requires institutions to show excellence not just in teaching and research but also strong systems for assurance of quality that promote continuous institutional improvement and satisfaction among key stakeholders (CHED, 2024). Systematic assessment of frontline student experiences provides empirical evidence that can guide strategic planning and resource allocation and service enhancement. Alongside this, the AUN QA framework stresses stakeholder-centered quality assurance, continuous improvement, and systematic use of stakeholder feedback as key elements of management quality (ASEAN University Network [AUN], 2020). Within this context, evaluating perceptions of frontline services allows the College to identify strengths of the institution, prioritize areas that need improvement, and generate evidence that supports quality assurance initiatives and long-term aspiration to achieve and sustain status as Center of Excellence.

Students interact regularly at frontline units that support both academic and administrative needs at Central Mindanao University College of Education. Experiences they report provide important information about the responsiveness and effectiveness of services. By comparing lower levels of satisfaction, the study singles out service dimensions that management should focus more closely on while also recognizing strengths that should be maintained.

Beginning with the premise that this research supports Educational Management in terms of transforming stakeholder input into data-driven recommendations that foster ongoing quality enhancements; rather than just seeing the "satisfaction survey" as a finish point (for assessing satisfaction), the research establishes satisfaction surveys as the starting-point for an ongoing evidence-based enhancement cycle allowing Institutional Leaders to identify priorities for enhancements, enhance service delivery, and further develop stakeholder centered governance.

With these considerations in mind, the purpose of the research was to present data-driven recommendations to increase the overall quality of frontline services provided by the College of Education; and provide recommendations as to which service aspects received relatively low satisfaction scores from stakeholders. These results will serve as a basis for institutional-level decisions regarding long-term strategic planning and continued efforts toward improving service quality.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A descriptive quantitative research design was employed in this study to provide data-driven recommendations for enhancing the quality of frontline services in the College of Education. The descriptive approach was considered appropriate as it enabled the identification of service dimensions that may serve as priority areas for continuous quality improvement initiatives, and it facilitated the systematic analysis of students' perceptions regarding the delivery of frontline services.

Participants of the Study

The participants included 118 students enrolled in the College of Education at Central Mindanao University. Females accounted for 64.4% of the participants, and males made up 35.6%. As such, a significant number of students were at the university for four years (82.2%). This experience with frontline services allowed the researchers to tap into valuable "end-user" insights into the practices that institutions use to deliver their services.

Research Instrument

Using a questionnaire adapted based on Cronin and Taylor's Performance Only Service Quality Model (SERVPERF) of 1992, student satisfaction with frontline services in the College of Education was evaluated. Modifications were made to this instrument to fit specific administrative conditions of the College of Education, and this consisted of two main parts. The first part collected respondent demographic information, specifically gender and length of time at the university. The second part measured student satisfaction on nine frontline service dimensions: Guidance Services, Medical Dental Services, Library Services, Security Services, Registrar Services, Accounting Services, Guidance and Counselling Services, Cashier Services, and Dean's Office Services.

Responses were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Very Dissatisfied) to 5 (Very Satisfied). Categories used for responses were 5: Very Satisfied (VS), 4: Satisfied (S), 3: Neutral (N), 2: Dissatisfied (D), and 1: Very Dissatisfied (VD).

Data Gathering Procedure

After institutional approval, questionnaires were then administered to student respondents. Students were informed that their responses would be kept confidential and that participation was voluntary. After completion of the questionnaires, responses were coded and subjected to statistical analysis.

Statistical Treatment of Data

Descriptive statistics including frequencies and percentages were used in data analysis. Scores were obtained to determine levels of satisfaction across evaluated frontline service dimensions and to identify services that score lower and that might merit institutional attention. Mean scores were interpreted as follows: 4.21 to 5.00 (Very Satisfied), 3.41 to 4.20 (Satisfied), 2.61 to 3.40 (Neutral), 1.81 to 2.60 (Dissatisfied), and 1.00 to 1.80 (Very Dissatisfied). These interpretations served as the basis for identifying high-priority areas for continuous enhancement of service quality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students generally gave positive evaluations of frontline services provided by the College of Education, as shown by results of this study. Dimensions of service with lower satisfaction ratings provide empirical evidence valuable for informing continuous initiatives for quality improvement. Results were seen as opportunities for strategic enhancement rather than lower ratings indicating poor performance.

Medical Dental Services scored the lowest mean score ($M = 4$, $SD = 0.75$), followed by Guidance Services ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.47$) among evaluated service dimensions. Using the adopted descriptive scale, both dimensions are still favorably rated by student respondents. Compared to other service dimensions, their lower ratings suggest these areas should receive priority attention from the institution.

Accessible and responsive healthcare services are a very important support for students in higher education institutions. They contribute significantly to

students' wellbeing and academic and overall educational experience. Suggestions are made for evaluating current service practices and strengthening institutional mechanisms that deal with the health needs of students based on lower satisfaction scores for this service dimension.

In line with this, to identify emerging concerns and service expectations, the study recommends that the College of Education, in collaboration with relevant institutional offices, conduct periodic assessments of students' healthcare-related service experiences. To ensure that students are adequately informed of the support available to them, institutional administrators may likewise strengthen information dissemination mechanisms regarding available medical and dental services. Also, continuous monitoring of service accessibility, responsiveness, and stakeholder satisfaction may further contribute to sustaining quality healthcare-related services within the institution.

Similarly, despite receiving favorable evaluations from the respondents, Guidance Services obtained comparatively lower satisfaction ratings. Services from this field play a critical role in supporting students' academic, career, and personal development. Guidance Services are of great importance in addressing students' immediate concerns and extend beyond facilitating holistic growth throughout students' educational journey.

The low ratings on Guidance Services indicate that there are also many opportunities to improve and strengthen the current procedures in place for providing student support services. The college services could develop several initiatives to enhance guidance-related programs and services, including regular evaluations of these types of programs and services; enhancing the ways that available guidance interventions are disseminated to students; assessing how accessible and responsive students perceive these services to be; and developing more responsive and stakeholder-centered service delivery approaches as a result of college services' better understanding of students' changing needs.

The importance of adopting data-driven approaches to institutional quality assurance initiatives is further highlighted by the findings. Administrators are being provided with valuable empirical evidence from the satisfaction assessments that may inform strategic

planning and resource allocation decisions. Comparatively lower satisfaction ratings may serve as practical indicators for identifying priority areas for continuous improvement while at the same time sustaining exemplary practices among highly rated services rather than uniformly allocating institutional resources across all service dimensions.

The present findings demonstrate that students' perceptions of actual service performance constitute valuable sources of evidence for institutional enhancement initiatives anchored on the SERVPERF framework. Meaningful insights regarding both institutional strengths and opportunities for improvement are provided from the students' experiences with frontline services. Moreover, the integration of regular stakeholder satisfaction performance evaluation may facilitate the continuous monitoring of service quality and support evidence-based decision-making system procedures.

For continuous service quality enhancement, Medical-Dental Services should be given priority for continuous quality improvement initiatives through regular quality evaluation of service accessibility, responsiveness, and stakeholder service satisfaction. Guidance Services should be further enhanced through continuous assessment of existing programs and service delivery mechanisms to ensure responsiveness to students' academic, career, and personal development needs. For monitoring the service quality trends across frontline service dimensions, regular stakeholder satisfaction assessments should be institutionalized as quality assurance mechanisms. Moreover, for prioritizing service enhancement initiatives and strategic resource allocation decisions, institutional administrators may utilize comparatively lower satisfaction ratings as empirical indicators. Lastly, continuous quality improvement efforts should also focus on sustaining exemplary practices among highly evaluated frontline services and not only on addressing comparatively lower-rated service dimensions.

CONCLUSION

Medical-Dental Services and Guidance Services provide valuable empirical evidence for identifying

priority areas for continuous service quality enhancement within the College of Education, as these services obtained comparatively lower satisfaction ratings. Rather than indicating institutional deficiencies, comparatively lower ratings identify areas where support mechanisms and service delivery can be strengthened through continuous quality improvement (Harvey & Williams, 2010).

The findings further highlight the importance of utilizing stakeholder feedback as a foundation for evidence-based institutional decision-making (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). To strategically prioritize improvement initiatives while sustaining exemplary service practices across frontline service units, higher education institutions should adopt data-driven approaches to service quality enhancement (Daniel, 2019). Continuous assessment of stakeholders' perceptions of actual service performance remains fundamental to developing responsive, student-centered, and quality-driven institutional environments (Carney, 2022; CHED, 2023).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

Through periodic service evaluations and strengthened stakeholder feedback mechanisms, Medical-Dental Services may be prioritized in institutional quality enhancement initiatives. Through the enhancement of existing student support programs and increased responsiveness to students' evolving needs and expectations, Guidance Services may be continuously improved. As part of the quality assurance framework for monitoring frontline service delivery practices, the College of Education may institutionalize regular satisfaction assessments. By utilizing stakeholders' satisfaction ratings in identifying priority areas for service enhancement, institutional administrators may adopt data-driven approaches to strategic planning and resource allocation. To provide deeper insights regarding institutional service quality, future studies may include other stakeholder groups, such as faculty members, administrative personnel, and alumni, and incorporate qualitative approaches.

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