The University during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Story of Resilience

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**ABSTRACT**

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| **Aims:** This qualitative study attempts to flesh out the factors intricately at play in the resilience of a private higher education institution during the COVID-19 pandemic.  **Study design:** Descriptive Phenomenology  **Place and Duration of Study:** Private Catholic University in Ozamiz City, Misamis Occidental, during Academic Year 2023-2024.  **Methodology:** The study involved 8 purposively-selected participants who were involved in major decision making of the university during the COVID-19 Pandemic through a selection criteria. In-depth interviews were conducted to examine the lived experiences, perspectives, and narratives of its key stakeholders offering insights into the resilient ethos that characterizes this institution. Braun and Clarke’s steps in thematic analysis was utilized to illuminate the themes of the participant’s narratives.  **Results:** The study illuminated four (4) main themes: (1) The university as an institution broadens its perspectives through Adapting Transformative Educational Dynamics, Tailor-fitting Partnership Policies and Support Program Practices, Using Diverse Technological Approaches and Innovations, and Advocating Inclusivity; (2) Programs and Initiatives Crafted for Students and Employees are Community-Based, Proactive, and Sustainable, Ensuring their Health and Spiritual Well-Being; (3) Collaboration and Compliance with Regulatory Agencies are Instrumental Measures to Ensure Safety and Security throughout the Campus and its Personnel; and (4) The university thrives from Institutional Financial Difficulties through Establishing Strategic Financial Management, Developing Resilience Despite Political Challenges, Committing to Employee-Centric Management, Cultivating a Culture of Financial Preparedness, and Enhancing Data Management Access.  **Conclusion:** Thus, such mechanisms empower the institution to endure, adapt, thrive, and prepare for unprecedented adversities in the future. |

*Keywords: lived experiences, transformative education, resilience, employee-centric management, culture of financial preparedness*

**1. INTRODUCTION**

After several busy years of business and work in various sectors and organizations, including academic institutions, the world stopped all its movement as the pandemic took hold. Universities were confronted with various issues and new obligations toward their student, faculty, staff, and the academic community about their futures and the economic burdens that threatened their survival (Shaya et al., 2022; Biswakarma et al., 2021). Academic leaders faced critical decisions that reshaped the academic communities. What was perceived as an impossible mode of school services and learning in the past was adopted to continue to deliver high-quality education and support to the communities.

Teachers and students started to adjust to computer-mediated classes. Administrators and other staff members learned to adapt to a work-from-home setup. However, transitions were always expected to be messy as challenges had to be faced. Biswakarma et al. (2021) mentioned that the greatest challenge was to move all academic activities online within a brief period, which also led to other new struggles like a huge workload, especially in the information technology (IT) departments of the universities, poor internet connectivity, privacy issues of online apps, etc. Added to the list were the reduced school operations and financial difficulties, which led to school closures.

Despite these challenges, remarkable stories of universities being able to weather the storm through innovation have surfaced. These adaptive efforts were extended into their communities by means of taking proactive steps to address immediate communal needs. Novel strategies were explored as a response to the need to adapt to this event. In global context, Chinawa et al. (2023) found that strong family and community ties helped students exhibit more resilience, highlighting the importance of social support for students' overall wellbeing in the university. Likewise, school administrators guided schools through the pandemic by implementing proactive, goal-setting strategies and fostering a supportive, upbeat atmosphere (Buskila et al., 2024). This is supported by Maitland & Glazzard, 2022 who also discovered that resilience is a result of both internal and external support networks, highlighting the significance of social ties and mental health throughout the pandemic. The ability to adapt quickly was not an option; it became a skill that had to be mastered by everyone.

Laigo (2023) claimed that most studies on resilience during the pandemic focused on primary and secondary schools, with fewer studies exploring resilience mechanisms at the university level. In addition, other scholars highlighted the need for further studies to investigate other aspects such as sustainable resilience strategies (Regehr & Rule, 2024), faculty resilience and mental health (Shaik et al., 2023), and institutional leadership and crisis management (Tan et al., 2023).

By embracing this moment of crisis as a "restart button" for higher education, universities can position themselves to increase their community impact and emerge from the pandemic stronger and more resilient than ever before (Dumulescu & Muţiu, 2021).  While many small private schools failed to recover after the pandemic, a private Catholic university in Ozamuz City, which also struggled in many ways, thrived and came out resilient, bringing its hard and meaningful lessons. After all its experiences, the university can now confidently and positively say that it can surmount any unprecedented event in the future. Its strength is the result of many beautiful stories of resilience from people of the community who worked together to bring the university to its present stage.

Thus, this study's purpose is to explore stories of resilience in the academic community, which the researchers believe, if not explored, would remain unheard and become a part of the forgotten past. Specifically, the study answered the grand tour question: How is the university during the COVID-19 pandemic?

**2. methodology**

This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore and understand the lived experiences of selected university employees. Phenomenology seeks to uncover the essence of experiences by interpreting how individuals perceive and make sense of their situations. Rooted in the philosophical traditions of Edmund Husserl and later expanded by Martin Heidegger, phenomenology emphasizes the subjective experiences of participants as they relate to a shared phenomenon—in this case, the challenges faced by a university during the COVID-19 pandemic (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2016).

The study was conducted in a private Catholic university in the province of Misamis Occidental, Philippines. The institution is an accredited level 2 university by the Philippine Accrediting Agencies of Schools, Colleges, and Universities (PAASCU). During the pandemic, the school grappled with the challenges brought by the crisis, however various programs were initiated to continue its operations.

The (8) participants of the study were selected office heads of the university, including the college deans, directors, and other key administrators. The participants were selected through purposive sampling. The following criteria were considered: (1) that they held key responsibilities (managing operations, policies, and decision-making) of the university during the pandemic; and (2) that they were willing to participate in the study.

The main instruments in the study were the researchers themselves. This highlighted the role of the researchers in transcribing, analyzing, and interpreting the utterances of the participants. However, an interview guide was formulated to serve as a secondary instrument to guide the researchers in the interview process. Semi-structured interviews were conducted which to identify the experiences of the participants during the pandemic. Using open-ended and probing questions (for further clarification and additional details), the interview explores extensively the perspectives of participants in managing the operations of the university during the pandemic, including the challenges faced and strategies employed.

Prior to the interview, participants were provided with informed consent forms seeking permission to conduct the study. Before the interview process, the participants were also explained with the purpose of the study. The participants were not coerced to participate in the study, thus voluntary participation was emphasized in the study. The interview was audio-recorded to capture the responses of the participants. These were then used for the verbatim transcription of their utterances.

Once the data were transcribed, it was analyzed using the thematic analysis process of Braun and Clarke (2006). They introduced six steps in their process: (1) familiarization of the data, (2) denerating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining themes, and (6) writing the report. This procedure in thematic analysis provided the researchers with sound themes which attaining a rich description and interpretation of the participants’ experiences.

The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines to maintain the integrity of the research as well as the well-being of its participants. Before the interviews, informed consent was obtained from them wherein the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and a right to withdraw at any time were outlined. The researchers also declared no conflict of interest in the conduct of this study.

**3. results and discussion**

**3.1 Understanding the University’s Journey towards Building Resilience**

From the challenges posed by COVID-19, which tested limitations of adaptation, resourcefulness, and endurance of all sectors like never before, the concept of resilience emerged as a source of hope and strength for individuals, communities, and institutions worldwide. Stories of resilience that prove humanity's ability to persist and prosper in the face of crisis despite uncertainty have shone brightly.

This qualitative study attempts to flesh out the factors at play in the resilience of a private Catholic university during the COVID-19 pandemic and to offer valuable insights into the resilient ethos that characterizes this institution by examining the lived experiences, perspectives, as well as narratives of its key stakeholders,

Through in-depth interviews, observations, and thematic analysis, the study illuminates four (4) main themes: (1) The university as an institution broadens its perspectives through Adapting Transformative Educational Dynamics, Tailor-fitting Partnership Policies and Support Program Practices, Using Diverse Technological Approaches and Innovations, and Advocating Inclusivity; (2) Programs and Initiatives Crafted for Students and Employees are Community-Based, Proactive, and Sustainable, Ensuring their Health and Spiritual Well-Being; (3) Collaboration and Compliance with Regulatory Agencies are Instrumental Measures to Ensure Safety and Security throughout the Campus and its Personnel; and (4) The university thrives from Institutional Financial Difficulties through Establishing Strategic Financial Management, Developing Resilience Despite Political Challenges, Committing to Employee-Centric Management, Cultivating a Culture of Financial Preparedness, and Enhancing Data Management Access. These underlying mechanisms empower La Salle University in its goal of adapting, enduring, and thriving in the face of adversity.

**3.1.1 Theme 1. The university as an academic institution broadens its perspectives through Adapting Transformative Educational Dynamics, Tailor-fitting Partnership Policies and Support Program Practices, Using Diverse Technological Approaches and Innovations, and Advocating Inclusivity.**

The pandemic had reshaped the operations of the university. In academics, the university adopted transformative and innovative dynamics to maintain the delivery of quality education despite the change of modality. Through its distance learning modality, students were offered two modes of learning: printed modular modality and online learning modality. Students were given choices to maintain learning accessibility despite some challenges they faced in distance education. Such challenges included the lack of technological infrastructure, financial constraints, geographical locations, and the like. The school also sold the computers in the computer laboratories at lower prices to the students to accommodate their need for devices in online learning. However, in some instances, the teachers also became more compassionate to the students by lending their devices to them to help them cope with the lessons online.

Both printed and online modules were teacher-made which personalized the learning for the students. They were also given the opportunity to learn in a self-paced manner; this allowed them to have ease in interacting and completing the modules. The following quotes, taken from the open-ended questions by the participants, revealed the transformative education dynamics adopted by the school:

*We provided our students with options during the pandemic, whether they chose online or offline modalities.* -P1

*Our computers and other devices in our computer labs were sold to the students at affordable prices so that students would have something to use during online learning.* -P1

*So what we did - Although it was not a part of the official program - - if the students didn't have devices, the faculty had to lend their devices. We really had instances like that: we had to lend them devices so that they could have access.* -P2

However, one of the best practices of the university was the investment of Canvas, which was the school’s official Learning Management System (LMS). The LMS became a transformative tool for the teachers in module designing and making. It has interactive features that suit the needs of both the teachers and students. Further,  the establishment of the Educational Technology Center (ETC) (formerly known as the Educational Media and Services Team during its first year) also marked another innovation for the school. The office takes charge in the conduct of training and seminars for the teachers in the utilization of Canvas. It was important for the university to create a transformative brand of learning that focuses on learner-centered learning experiences through digital education. The statements of the respondents exemplify the innovations done by the university:

*We adopted Canvas as our Learning Management System (LMS). If we remember, during the disruption of classes in the middle of the second semester, each teacher had his/her own measure to continue his/her lesson. There were some who used Messenger, Google Classroom, Edmodo. That was how we started, and that’s the reason why we really invested in our own LMS for the next school year.* -P1

*We created the Educational Technological Center to lead teacher training in terms of technology integration in their teaching. Part of this was the training in the use of interactive tools and applications.* -P1

*We had a series of scaling and upscaling of faculty members, including our orientation and training in the navigation of Canvas. In fact, we had our Canvas Proficiency Course to help teachers utilize Canvas.* -P1

The transformative feature of Canvas also provided the students with meaningful and learner-centered learning experiences. One of the participants mentioned, *“Canvas also has Discussion Boards, aside from the feedback they received from their quizzes. This allows the students to engage in the lesson as they give their answers to the question asked by the teacher.”* In a way, such a feature in Canvas has become an asynchronous form of dialogue, increasing learner engagement in remote learning setups.

The adoption of this transformative education dynamics allows everyone in the university to adjust to the new ways of how things are done and poses a challenge to think outside the box. The focus of education should not be on providing literacy and numeracy only; it should provide people with the knowledge, skills, and values they need to take part in resolving global challenges.  The component of this quality learning that plays a vital role in promoting sustainable development is transformative education. Students at all levels must be equipped with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes necessary to tackle the complex global issues we confront today, such as climate change, environmental decline, biodiversity loss, poverty, and inequality (Arbeiter & Bučar, 2021; UNESCO, nd).

Meanwhile, the deans of the different colleges admitted to having difficulty sending their students for on-the-job (OJT) training during the pandemic. Due to limited mobilities and the scare of the virus contamination, many employers during that time resort to either not accepting OJT trainees or conducting the OJT remotely. Thus, other colleges devised other strategies to continue the implementation as stipulated in their curricular programs. Some revisions of the existing policies were necessary; nevertheless, other Departments also relied on the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) instructions relative to OJT deployment. However, alternatives were sought in the continued implementation of OJT and internship programs. These are the statements of some Deans:

*They [students] were given tasks; they were having work-from-home arrangements. For example, they do designs at home. They will submit their outputs to their employers and training providers...* -P2

*During the pandemic, we were really affected because DepEd did not allow deployment in education because their modality was pure printed modules… However, they were exposed to a private school through online delivery. They were asked to teach online.* -P1

*Yes, because they were asked to observe. However, during that time, the number of hours of observations and teachings was lowered, considering that they were focused in the private school.* -P1

*Although the OJT continued, the most important part of [On-the-Job] Training was lost: the experience of the graduating students in the workplace. That's why we currently don't allow online OJT because the main purpose of OJT is actually to be in the workplace. There's truly no replacement for it.* -P2

As an inclusive school, La Salle University also admits differently-abled students, those who belong to ethnic minorities, the marginalized, and even those struggling academically. As a Catholic university, The university commits to opening its threshold to the less advantaged.

During the pandemic, deaf students were also given equal access to quality education. They were all enrolled in online learning; however, they were given much attention and special consideration when joining synchronous online classes and answering their Canvas online modules. The following statements, expressed by the participants narrate how the school fostered inclusivity despite the pandemic:

*To cater to our students who are deaf, our teachers make sure that the materials posted in Canvas address their needs. For instance, if teachers upload videos in Canvas, they have to make sure that the videos have subtitles because these deaf students cannot hear anything.* -P3

*We have students with disabilities; we, of course, understand that we ought to accommodate them…* -P2

*We also offered inclusivity to those students struggling in their academics through the student organizations. For example, our Math Club offered free tutorial services.* -P1

*We provided our IP students with scholarships. We partnered with our Local Government Unit to be the education provider for their scholars.* -P1

However, the lack of guidelines in attending to the needs of these students also hindered the sustainability of this practice. One of the participants mentioned:

*The school really wants to help them, but as of now, we don't have clear guidelines. It is at the discretion of each college how they could accommodate and support them without compromising the minimum requirements of the course.* -P2

Universities serve as platforms for promoting equity and social justice. By fostering policies that support diversity, equity, and inclusion, institutions ensure that education is accessible to individuals regardless of socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, or ability (Villa-Enciso et al., 2023). Creating safe spaces, supporting underrepresented groups, and embedding multicultural perspectives in curricula contribute to a more inclusive academic environment (Azhibayeva et al., 2024).

Overall, the university has broadened its perspective on the opportunities brought about by the pandemic. The participants narrated that the pandemic offered the university a concept of learning that takes place beyond the four walls of the classroom. Education, therefore, has become borderless. The school has become flexible in its program offerings as well as the delivery of instruction.

On the other hand, teachers have embraced the challenges and take them as opportunities for learning and self-improvement. Some teachers even reported that facing such challenges provided them with ways to nurture their creativity and pedagogical skills. Through online learning, potentials were discovered in service of promoting their effectiveness and efficiency as teachers.

Most importantly, the school maintained the core educational values despite the changing and evolving landscape of education. Despite the alarm and precariousness brought by the pandemic, the university remained resilient and thriving, driven by its mission on faith, zeal of service, and communion in mission. The narratives below elucidate the lessons acquired by the university community during the pandemic:

*Our teachers have also become very creative during the pandemic. Many of them are using screencast lessons. They video record themselves as they discuss the lesson and publish it in Canvas, instead of synchronously discussing it to the class.* -P3

*...as much as we want to provide flexibility as they go about their education, it is important to recognize the currently irreplaceable aspects.* -P2

*During the pandemic, I learned that part of being an educator is being able to address the needs of students: to provide them with the means to continue learning at their own pace and to recognize their challenges while nurturing a quality type of education.* -P2

*Education should be flexible. We don't know what will eventually happen. Learning isn't confined within the school. Sometimes, we erroneously think that students only learn inside the classroom.... Learning is continuous. What the school does is to provide structure and guidance.* -P2

*We have the ability to handle and look for solutions when we are faced with certain circumstances. We did not plan everything, but we learned how to navigate with our lives to survive.* -P1

The adoption of digital learning platforms, artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and blockchain for credential verification exemplifies how universities can innovate to enhance educational delivery (Adipat & Chotikapanich, 2024). Universities may stay relevant in the face of global issues and  changes such as the pandemic by incorporating cutting-edge pedagogical models including competency-based education, interdisciplinary curriculum, and experiential learning (Kiss & Vass (2019). This is supported by the research of Qian (2019), who asserted that this change calls into question established academic frameworks and necessitates that instructors modernize their methods of instruction while encouraging students to pursue lifelong learning. The university's attempts to customize collaborations and support programs, however, are consistent with the findings of Villa et al. (2019), who asserted that mutual growth and sustainability are facilitated when policies are tailored to unique institutional and partner needs. Student achievement and retention are increased by putting in place support services including career services, mentoring, and scholarships that are catered to different student populations (Morrell et al., 2022).

Through this, universities strengthen their position as catalysts for societal change when they extend their horizons through inclusive policies, technological innovation, transformative instruction, and strategic partnerships. To guarantee long-term success in promoting academic excellence and social impact, higher education institutions will need to continue evolving via strategic planning, stakeholder collaboration, and sustainable investment.

**3.1.2** **Theme 2. Programs and Initiatives Crafted for Students and Employees are Community-Based, Proactive, and Sustainable, Ensuring their Health and Spiritual Well-Being**

During the pandemic, La Salle University placed premium importance on its stakeholders’ health and well-being, especially of the students and employees. Mental health was among the primary concerns among the community members. According to Sedgwick et al. (2022), the physical closure of higher education institutions placed students in a situation not familiar with them.  They lived in areas with differing conditions and with different options to keep their social life as close to ‘normal’ as possible. In order to aid both students and employees, the Lasallian Mission Unit (LMU), through the Career and Counseling Center (CCC), launched sessions of “Kumustahan” to engage the community together. It was a safe space for the students and faculty to express their problems and anxieties and promote healthy conversations in the Lasallian community. Because of the limitations brought by the pandemic, most of the sessions were conducted online. The statements expressed by the participants explicate the practices of the university in advocating for mental health:

*We arrange “Kumustahan” interviews with our counselors for the students. Each student has a 15-20 minute session with their counselor. These allow the counselors to determine the students who are in need of additional counseling sessions.* -P6

*The school hosted a number of discursive and group guidance sessions (organized by CCC). This was during when self-reported depression was on the rise (which coincided with the subsequent lockdowns). The sessions, which were mainly designed for students, were meant to identify areas in need of clarification and wherein resilience can be emphasized.* -P5

*Personally, I facilitate a series called Gaan. This was an on-site activity formation intended to help non-teaching personnel alleviate some of their work-related problems through sharing or unburdening. This was also conducted for teaching personnel.* -P6

*They (CCC) implemented a model where small groups of 2-3 people would specialize under the academic team, focusing on mental health and career support. For instance, if you were part of the mental health team, you would handle all mental health initiatives for the center, from basic education to graduate school.* -P6

*…designing a mental coping program/project known as Joshua Tree, with a touch of religious formation.* -P7

While other schools resorted to retrenchment in their employees, the university had not opted to retrench its employees. The school saw to it that its employees would be retained and, in fact, ensured their continued work, as it was challenging to look for work during that time. As the school continued to operate in the middle of peril because of the pandemic, the school extended additional benefits to the employees required to work onsite. Imbued by its core value of communion in mission, employees were provided financial assistance to support their online teaching. Such financial aid included internet allowance and financial provisions for tested COVID-19-positive employees, among others. In collaboration with local businesses, purchasing discounts were offered to students and employees when they acquired devices for online learning. Shuttle services were also catered to teachers who live outside the city to help them get to and from home and school safely. Meanwhile, the school also permitted remote teachings, as the school provided guidelines on flexible work arrangements.

The statement from one of the participants reveals the support provided by the school to its employees:

*Shuttle services were provided from Tangub to Jimenez... pandemic allowance and load allowance for pocket WIFI... Free swab tests... provision for 14 days of COVID leave, excused with pay... 5,000 allowance for those who tested positive…* -P7

*Flexible work arrangements were also introduced. We have distributed an email with the guidelines for flexible work arrangements, along with the relevant support provided by the school. There were two sets of guidelines (including the revised version). Both of them were sent by email.* -P7

As a university whose core value is to build a supportive community through faith and service, it was essential for the school to sustain its formative and spiritual programs for its employees. More than maintaining the mental well-being of the faculty and staff, it was also fundamental for the school to restore their spiritual welfare. The quotations from the participants explain the relevance of spiritual and formative programs:

*We celebrate the Mass every afternoon on the school campus, which is simultaneously streamed online.* - P6

*The newly recruited formators focus on the Lasallian partners. They are encharged with formation programs such as recollection and the like.* -P6

*At La Salle, every event is viewed as an opportunity for formation. This perspective likely influenced the decision to employ an adult formator dedicated to this particular area.*  -P6

Principally, the university believed that the pandemic was essential to achieving balance in all aspects of one’s life through community building and support. The respondents narrated:

*I think that community support is very important. The program's success relies on their support, a challenge I faced during the pandemic as certain areas demanded greater focus.*  P6

*It's essential to innovate, experiment, and learn in response to changes… exploring alternative methods is necessary to effectively serve our students.* -P6

*Realizing the importance of maintaining balance between health, studies, work, and personal life…Realizing that learning is not crippled by limited mobility.* -P7

Proactive programs have a strong emphasis on taking preventative action to address stress management, mental health, and professional growth. To provide students and staff with coping skills, universities use mindfulness training, resilience-building workshops, and wellness courses (Moore, 2004). Everyone is protected against the pandemic by these measures, which also guarantee increased productivity and promote a culture of comprehensive well-being inside the organization. Furthermore, proactive, community-based, and long-lasting wellness programs guarantee that workers and students flourish in a setting that places a high value on their bodily and spiritual health.

**3.1.3 Theme 3. Collaboration and compliance with regulatory agencies are instrumental measures to ensure safety and security throughout the campus and its personnel.**

While being in a quandary in its transition to a never-explored modality in the teaching-learning process, the university also prioritized the implementation of a risk management system. Safeguarding the well-being of every person who sets foot on campus had become a significant responsibility of the university to guarantee their uninterrupted academic journey despite the looming threat of the pandemic. Through periodic orientation, compliance, and assessment of safety and security policies, the university effectively promoted an environment where personnel, students, and visitors alike felt safe and protected. The Vice-Chancellor for Administration shared the following:

*The campus Internal Security And Safety officer periodically conducts orientation sessions for our security guards to assure that we comply with the policies and guidelines necessary for maintaining our safety and security.* -P6

*The institution maintains its safety and security policy, which undergoes periodic revisions but not on a monthly basis. The updates are made as the need arises. This includes adjustments following third-party evaluations and assessments. We invite General Tabangcora to review our campus safety and security measures for such assessments. -*P3

*Based on his evaluations, changes and updates will be made to our security policy*. -P7

The university was not alone in its journey toward exploring new platforms to continue delivering education and services to stakeholders. The Commission of Higher Education and other government agencies continued to assist higher education units, including the university, in facilitating transition in education and other academic and non-academic services in various universities. Conforming to the requirements set forth by CHED and other regulatory bodies, the university successfully moved past traditional onsite activities to online platforms, putting stakeholder well-being first.

A smooth transition to remote work setup had been smoothly implemented because of the guidelines set by regulatory bodies.  Sedgwick et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of citizens complying with the mandates of the government to uphold social order, as noncompliance can result in other societal problems and severe consequences. One of the participants mentioned: “*In terms of adhering to national regulations, such as those set by CHED, we actively respond and comply with their directives.”*

In addition, another participant also shared:

*We are also in compliance with environmental regulations. We have an Environmental Compliance Certificate issued by the DENR. Due to potential changes in the campus landscape, this certificate may require updating in about five years or whenever we plan new building constructions. -*P8

The pandemic was a test of the values of institutions, challenging their commitment to serve not just the people within them but also extend support to the broader society. The university, guided by the values instilled by its founder, showed a profound sense of responsibility not only towards the welfare of its Lasallian community but also to the larger community beyond its walls. Recognizing that the wider community is the ultimate beneficiary of the Lasallian values it espouses, the university embraced its role as an example of support and solidarity. Acknowledging that resilience alone was insufficient and meaningless without addressing the needs of its surroundings, the university embarked on a series of mission-oriented collaborative endeavors despite its limited resources. Experts in the university worked collaboratively to mechanize sanitation tents positioned on campus and in selected hospitals within the city.  As shared by one of the interviewees

*There were a series of regular meetings. We collaborated closely with the engineering department, leveraging their expertise to mechanize the Sanitation Tent's spray. Notably, Engineer J, as he was the one who designed the Sanitation Tent.* -P4

*The mixture solution that is fed to the spray is handled by Engr. L (who is a chemical engineer).* -P3

*We have to be responsive to the call of time. This includes understanding the needs not just within our school or campus but also those of the wider community, offering our skills and expertise where they can be most helpful.* -P4

*Our efforts extended beyond just our campus; we served the entirety of Ozamiz City and Misamis Occidental. We assisted other municipalities in establishing sanitation tents at their checkpoints.* -P5

Being responsive to the current needs was developed along with the university’s resilience during the pandemic. Also, it learned a great lesson that by proactively promoting collaboration and compliance with national policies under challenging situations, no pandemic will ever become insurmountable. As Davis and Farrell (2016) put it, Law enforcement partnerships improve response times and give school staff the training they need. By interacting with regulatory agencies, colleges may put best practices in disaster planning, cybersecurity, fire safety, and crisis management into practice. Ultimately, proactive, sustainable, and community-based wellness programs guarantee that workers and students flourish in a setting that values their physical and spiritual well. Furthermore, preserving campus safety and providing a safe and encouraging learning environment for everyone depends heavily on cooperation and adherence to regulatory bodies.

**3.1.4 Theme 4. The university thrives from institutional financial difficulties through: Establishing strategic financial management; Developing resilience despite political challenges; Committing to employee-centric management; Cultivating a culture of financial preparedness; and Enhancing data management and access.**

As being largely dependent on student enrollment, private institutions, like the university, are vulnerable to financial instability. Needless to say, during the pandemic the university finds itself grappling for its survival. Thus, putting up financial management strategies to sustain institutional operations is a must. While businesses and academic institutions sustained damage brought about by the pandemic, it also yielded strategic benefits for the university in certain respects. For instance, electricity fees, labor costs, and other related expenses that previously constituted its budget were greatly reduced. Shaikh (2021) discussed the need to create a financial plan in light of the COVID-19 crisis. This plan helps organizations support financial oversight and control, anticipate future changes, and distribute funds appropriately to achieve financial objectives. This helps anticipate financial oversight due to unforeseen changes and control/distribute funds appropriately for one’s financial objectives.

An effective COVID-19 budget allows for a better monitoring of activities and for more accurate estimations. However, some organizations struggle to appreciate the benefits of budgeting.

As recounted by the Vice Chancellor for Finance, the university even before the pandemic had been facing financial difficulty due to the continuous decline of enrollment; however, the pandemic brought a compelling change in terms of its budget.

*Pandemic or before the pandemic, financially, we are in the same situation. The only thing is during the pandemic, costs went down. For example, there was no face-to-face so no laboratory expenses. We saved a little money, but we are also not charging laboratory fees. We lost on revenue but we saved on expenses. We reduced our electricity energy fee because there was no face-to-face… no aircons, so although we lost the fees, we also did not pay that much.* -P2

*So, more or less, financially, it was like in the pre-pandemic but with a lesser cost because we followed the instructions from CHED not to charge students with unnecessary fees. We did not collect energy, laboratory, or even student activities fees because there were no student activity programs then, but we did not spend any money.* -P2

*It was not much of a challenge because everything slowed down. Most of the suppliers, except in terms of labor, our school did not hire any labor services (e.g., janitorial services) because we do not have classes.* -P2

Although the pandemic has altered the educational landscape, it has also introduced a new perspective on how things are done and obliged schools to explore non-traditional processes.  For example, the university had been considering transitioning to a blended learning model before the pandemic; however, its implementation of this new method could not be realized because of possible hurdles, such as its novelty approach and apprehensions of stakeholders accustomed to traditional teaching methods. The pandemic strategically facilitated the adoption of blending learning at the university with minimal resistance and made everyone unquestionably embrace it despite the confusion and uncertainty. As the interviewee put it, “*There is a plan not to go back to full face-to-face. It has been a long-term project even before the pandemic.”*

Based on the interview, it seemed that the university did not encounter much problems with its purchases.  As shared by the interviewee

*We are just thankful because we have sea port and airport, so in cases where we have deliveries from Manila, they are still delivered. Unlike other cities, which do not have any delivery infrastructures. So we are not quite worried about the delay.* -P5

One challenge was attributed to the collection of tuition fees because of the absence of face-to-face transactions, yet the university was able to surmount this by opening other payment channels. The pandemic became instrumental in the university exploring other means of collection, and both the university and the payees have since benefited from the convenience and efficiency of these channels.

*Challenges in the office were really related to the collection (tuition fees collection) because there was no face-to-face transaction, so they did not come to the office.* -P3

*So what we did was open up other channels for payment (e.g. M Lhuiller, Palawan). Because we were not physically here, we made sure that bank payments were well-facilitated. Payments from Gcash as well as from Dragonpay (online payment using a credit card) were also allowed. -*P6

However, that’s not the sole reason for our payment collection issue. A big part of the problem was the delay in Tertiary Education Subsidy (TES) disbursement. Many students greatly relied on TES grants to support their education, but because of the said delays (most of which are caused by COVID operations), the school was hard-pressed to encourage them to pay for their tuition while waiting for the subsidy.  Nevertheless, the university sought alternative sources of funding to sustain its operations and maintain payment of salaries for its personnel. The finance officer pronounced with confidence, “*We looked for other sources of funds.”*

Not only did this proactive approach from the university help mitigate the financial strains, but it also showed how committed the university was toward its staff and its students. Some of the administrators also agreed on the importance of finding ways in providing salaries to the employees as the issue on the TES continued. This problem was shared through the following statements of the university administrators:

*The biggest challenge of the school was the delay by the government in paying and processing the TES. Majority of our students are TES grantees, and they are relying on the subsidy so we have a big problem financially.* -P4

*In my understanding, during the pandemic, there were guidelines that were changed, so our grantees went down. That’s the reason why until now they are still paying us. We are talking about probably 100 million receivable from the government, and where can you get that amount of money to pay the salary of the employees if the government is not giving us the subsidy.* -P7

*The TES has become a political issue, and the students are the ones suffering because what they could have been receiving is converted to support COVID operations during the pandemic.* -P2

Amidst the struggle faced during the pandemic, while many private institutions were forced to make difficult decisions like retrenching employees or suspending operations, the university showed remarkable resilience among its members. Instead of yielding to the pressures, it remained steadfast in looking after the welfare of the whole community and in supporting its lay partners through uncertain times.  Despite the reduced and confusing work hours of the employees, the school did not focus on how much they had given for work but it cared more for their welfare. Recognizing the struggles faced by its lay partners, the university went above and beyond to make sure their needs were met and that they were supported to thrive despite the adversities.

By committing to Employee-Centric Management in nurturing institutional resilience during the pandemic, the university had proven that it is indeed a Lasallian family that a member can depend on. By taking care of its people, the university not only weathered the storm of the pandemic but also emerged as a shining example of a compassionate and supportive community, embodying the values Saint John Baptist de La Salle - its spiritual founder.

The words of the VC-Finance had been heartwarming to hear as he shared: “*We have to make sure that our employees have food on their table.”*

*More than 50% of the school’s expenditures were on the teachers’ salary. Since our employees are employed, although some of them are doing work-from-home, we still pay them with full salary. Basically, we are making sure that we were able to pay our employees full amount.* -P2

*Even if we know that our employees are working at home probably at one hour and do something else the next 7 hours, we did not care for so long as we support their families. We gave them full payment of their salary. We made sure to look for the money.* -P2

As the world witnessed how everything changed during the pandemic and how certain things became uncertain. All sectors, including businesses and academic institutions, learned to pause, study, learn, and thrive. the university did not waver in its commitment to its students. Without delay, it put in efforts in refining how it manages its data and reporting (school automation) to make it easier for them to have access to flexible learning. This greatly helped the university to keep track of its receivables and collect them efficiently.

As it acknowledged the needed support for its transition to the new teaching-learning modality, the university established a specialized office tasked with supervising all aspects of academic and non-academic endeavors conducted in the virtual domain.

By taking this proactive approach, the difficulties associated with adjusting to remote learning were mitigated, and a sense of regularity and uninterrupted progress was maintained in the face of the pandemic's challenges.

*We invested in Canvas (LMS) during the pandemic. Right now, we are using it because you, guys, love it. We spent 5 million pesos per year. In terms of expenses in our infrastructure, we focused on investing these to support our remote learning modalities.* -P1

*Probably, one of our best practices during COVID was when we invested in LMS and Canvas, and the academics support that. I saw that the teachers like the LMS, so we paid for its subscription.* -P5

*We have projects to support creating content that the students can access online and that is ETC.* -P3

Thesubscription of the Learning Management System, CANVAS was one of the visions of the former brother president, which was to give students the opportunity to access content anytime and anywhere during the pandemic. Moreover, through LMS faculty members had the chance to explore other platforms to deliver their teaching. Just like students, there were other skills discovered. Despite the hurried transition, teachers’ engagement in delivering learning was not sacrificed. Ojo et al. (2021) stressed that organizational support is very important to ease employee’s productivity by providing them the essential facilities like efficient IT infrastructure especially during uncertain situations like a pandemic.

As the world starts to heal from the damage brought about by the pandemic, it leaves institutions and people an unforgettable lesson: not to be complacent in everything. Moreover, it taught a lot of people that nobody could be spared, even the strongest, that the future is always uncertain, and that to be ready to face its uncertainty is to be ready now.

*So, we are resilient in terms of being prepared to move on and make sure everyone is happy. So, right now we are setting up money because I believe in the saying “ You save for the rainy days.” True enough, we really need to save for the rainy days because we do not know when is the next pandemic.* -P7

Moreover, the words of the VC-Finance resonated with the confidence of how the university learned its lesson and readied itself for the next pandemic (God forbid). Though nobody knows what the future holds, one thing is guaranteed, the university will remain aiming for resiliency – to overcome and stand stronger. Its beautiful stories will be forever kept in the hearts of those who were part of the journey and will remain cherished in the distant future.

**Transformative education, inclusivity, technological innovation, community-centered initiatives, collaboration, strategic financial management, employee-centric practices, and improved data management are instrumental in building a resilient university**.

**4. Conclusion**

This study concludes that resilience in the context of a private Catholic higher education institution covers four main domains: transformative academic resilience, proactive, sustainable, and community-based programs and initiatives, community safety and security, and strategic resource preparedness. This exploration offers a blueprint for educational institutions seeking to navigate crises with integrity, foresight, and community-centered approaches.

With this, it can be recommended to develop an institutional resiliency framework and resiliency index, sustaining programs and initiatives for all stakeholders, and continuous exploration of innovative pedagogies to prepare for unprecedented events that may disrupt academic operations. Future research may consider ongoing research and reflection on resilience to refine institutional strategies, especially in other educational contexts.

Consent

Consent was sought from the key administrators of the university to be involved as participants of the study. All key participants agreed and consented to participate. None of the participants withdrew from the data interview.

It is recommended that graduate programs continue to emphasize both professional

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