

EMPOWERING THE YOUTH THROUGH VOLUNTARISM: UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES GRADUATES AS VOLUNTEER TEACHERS (1998-2003)

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ABSTRACT

In 1994, the University of the Philippines established *Ugnayan ng Pabiniungod* as the premier state university's volunteer service program to promote engaged citizenship among its constituents and to integrate voluntarism into the university's academic functions of teaching, research and extension. Launched in 1997, the *Gurong Pabiniungod* (Volunteer Teacher Program) became the centerpiece initiative of this program. It was designed to deploy volunteers for one academic year, as subject-matter teachers in basic education courses such as English, history, mathematics and science in underserved areas identified by the Department of Education. The program was viewed by *Pabiniungod's* advocates as the university's intervention in dealing with the problems besetting the public education sector such as shortage of teachers and low quality of instruction.

This article examines the modes of intervention employed by volunteer teachers as bearers of change in communities, from 1998 to 2003. It also attempts to analyze the discourses of empowerment contained in the mass of documents produced throughout the first five years of existence of the program. The discourses of empowerment and identity as practiced and constructed by the volunteer teachers showed two key levels of empowerment in their experiences and thoughts. The first level is the self-fulfillment of volunteers in sharing their time, skills and knowledge as teachers cum community workers. The other level of empowerment is the volunteers' realization that they were really the ones being empowered because they learned more from the community and grew to be better individuals out of the experience.

Keywords: voluntarism, youth, empowerment, University of the Philippines, *Ugnayan ng Pabiniungod*, *Gurong Pabiniungod*

Introduction

Voluntarism is generally defined as a “conscious act of willingly sharing resources in response to a need without expecting material compensation.”¹ It is not merely an expression of altruism out of sheer benevolence, however, but also a mechanism of an individual or a collective to contribute to meaningful social change. In a nation beset by a myriad of problems, the value of volunteer work becomes more significant and opportune — responding to government’s inadequacy in providing services needed by its citizens. It has been observed that voluntarism continues to play an important role in the contemporary world because of the following reasons: “(1) the need for civil society to take up the slack left by both public and private sectors; (2) the fact that volunteers respond to people in need; (3) the need for voluntarism to humanize the technology; (4) and the ability of voluntarism to bridge divisions among people” (Cariño, 1996, p.12). Thus, the relevance of voluntary work has not diminished with the reconfiguration of the postmodern world by massive technological innovations.

In the Philippines, the last 20 years saw initiatives in the voluntary sector characterized by the formation of networks of organized voluntary organizations such as the Philippine Association for Volunteer Efforts (PAVE) in 1994 and the Voluntary Organizations’ Information, Coordination, and Exchange (VOICE) in 2002. In the same period, *Ugnayan ng Pabinungod* (Oblation Corps), the country’s first university-based formal volunteer service program, was created in the University of the Philippines.

The establishment of *Pabinungod* was the University’s response to perturbing findings of a study to ascertain the attitudes and values of UP students in the early 1990s that was designed and conducted by two of its senior professors, Dr. Maria Luisa Doronila and Dr. Ledivina Cariño (Doronila & Cariño, 1993). The study showed that social commitment did not register as an important part of the value system among UP students. “Has UP lost its soul?” After the release of the study, this question became the focus of discussion, both formal and informal, among University academics and activists on UP’s role in nation-building and social transformation. It was in this milieu that Dr. Emil Javier assumed the presidency of the UP in 1993². In the first year of his administration, he convened a workshop on voluntarism and instituted *Ugnayan ng Pabinungod* as a value-formation program for employees and students alike. *Ugnayan* in Filipino means having a relationship. *Pabinungod*, a Cebuano term which literally means ‘dedicating oneself’ to a cause, is the closest equivalent to the University’s symbol of man offering himself in the service of the nation represented by the Oblation. The centerpiece program, the *Gurong Pabinungod*

Program (GPP), was launched in 1997 by the University in collaboration with the country's Department of Education.

This article examines the modes of intervention employed by the GPP coordinators and volunteer teachers as catalysts of change in communities that were 'underserved' and confronted with meager resources from 1998 to 2003. It also attempts to analyze the discourse/s of empowerment contained in the mass of documents produced throughout the first five years of existence of the program. These documents include reports, field notes, and reflection essays of volunteer teachers. Since most of the papers were written by the volunteers, it is possible to examine the extent of reflexivity of the volunteers such as to what level they fused their academic grounding with the worldviews of those they served as they lived out their volunteer work and as they represented this in texts.

The discourses of empowerment and identity as practiced and constructed by the volunteer teachers show two key levels of empowerment in their experiences and thoughts. The first level is the fulfillment of the volunteers' expected task to share their time, skills and knowledge as teachers cum community workers. The other level of empowerment is the volunteers' realization that they were really the ones being empowered because they learned more from the community and grew to be better individuals out of the experience.

The *Pahinungod* Experiment

Undoubtedly, there are a lot of undocumented life stories of UP graduates who on their own volition became catalysts of change in their respective communities. Over more than a century of the university's existence, thousands of students, faculty, staff and alumni have offered services in a variety of ways without expecting material benefits. Being the country's premier institution of higher learning with several campuses in various parts of the archipelago³, UP has played a vital role in the life of the nation. UP alumni have been leaders and trailblazers in their respective fields. Exemplary models of graduates who made volunteer work and social commitment the *raison d'être* of their existence were documented in a book published by the University in the year that commemorated the centenary of the Philippine Independence (Alfonso & Aquino, 1998).

However, while there is a culture of voluntarism in the University, volunteer service itself was not an integral part of academic life.

On February 28, 1994, the *Ugnayan ng Pabinungod* was launched as a volunteer service program not only to enhance the spirit of social commitment and civic awareness among UP's stakeholders but also to integrate voluntarism into the University's three-fold functions of instruction, research and extension. Dr. Ledivina Cariño served as the program's first system director.

As gleaned from the different brochures and reports of *Ugnayan ng Pabinungod*, five of *Pabinungod's* main goals are the following:

- to improve the significance of instruction and research by exposing the UP community to the realities in the communities while learning from the people the country's conditions and needs;
- to serve as a mechanism of values education;
- to advance voluntarism as a field of study;
- to render public service through voluntary and direct assistance to marginalized communities, local governments, non-government organizations, and small-scale businesses; and
- to promote multi-disciplinary collaboration among academic units of the University and contribute UP's resources in nation-building.

The first five years of *Pabinungod* saw the implementation of a multitude of programs with support from students, staff and faculty of the different UP campuses — medical missions coupled with training of community-based health professionals and seminars on basic health care; relief and rehabilitation work in calamity-stricken areas; programs empowering farmers as agricultural scientists; summer immersion programs for students to gain insights directly from the community; service learning as an instructional method; peer counseling; ecology camps; training workshops for teachers on updated pedagogical skills; examination reviews for students in the provinces underrepresented in UP (affirmative action program); and deployment of graduates as volunteer teachers in remote areas (*Gurong Pabinungod*). The variety of programs embodied the depth of human resources that the UP could offer as an academic institution and provided alternative venues for students beyond what they could read and hear about inside the University. In line with the new thrust on voluntarism, voluntary sector management was developed as a course at the University's National College of Public Administration and Governance (NCPAG).

However, in 1999, with a change of administration in UP, under the leadership of Dr. Francisco Nemenzo⁴, it was decided that *Pabinungod's* programs

would be rationalized by focusing mainly on education enrichment initiatives such as the sending of volunteer teachers to far-flung areas, teacher training and service learning.

Conceptualized in 1997 and implemented the year after, *Gurong Pabinungod* became *Pabinungod's* centerpiece program.⁵ In 1998, the program had planned to send 100 volunteer teachers as the University's concrete contribution to the nation on the occasion of the celebration of 100 years of Philippine independence. Limited funds, however, only allowed the University to send 47 volunteers for school year 1998-1999 to 24 schools in 13 provinces, from the landlocked province of Abra in Northern Luzon down to the southernmost part of the country, Tawi-Tawi. The program's key objective was to deploy volunteers for one academic year as subject-matter specialists in basic secondary courses such as English, history, mathematics and science in underserved areas identified by the Department of Education. In actual experience, however, the scarcity of teachers in these areas forced the volunteer teachers to handle subjects, such as Filipino and values education, that were not stipulated in the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the UP and the Department of Education.

The *Gurong Pabinungod* Program was designed to respond to the educational system's perennial problems which include a dearth of teachers, unbalanced student-teacher ratios, and low quality of instruction. The program also aimed to broaden *Pabinungod's* earlier short-term learning enrichment programs such as the Teacher Training Program (TTP) and Affirmative Action Program (AAP). The volunteers were also expected to render community service based on the assessed need/s of the area being served.

Embodying the University's response to the deteriorating state of basic education, the *Pabinungod* volunteer teachers were intervening in the basic education sector characterized by a shortage of teachers, insufficiency of learning and teaching materials, outmoded curricula, lack of classrooms, ill-equipped laboratories, stinking toilets, high dropout rates, lopsided student-teacher ratios, and incompetence of teachers in handling basic courses as a result of their inadequate academic preparation in terms of content and pedagogical methods. These stark realities of the country's educational system were documented by a comprehensive study conducted by the Joint Congressional Commission to Study and Review Philippine Education in 1991⁶. It has been three decades since the release of the 'EDCOM Report' but the country's education sector remains weak and ineffective.

During the program's six-year stint, the Department of Education was the University's main partner in implementing the program. Lines of coordination between UP and the Department of Education were outlined in a Memorandum of Agreement signed by the two parties in 1997 for a three-year partnership. The agreement was renewed in 2001. The University, through *Pabinungod*, handled the administrative component of the program: the recruitment, training, and monitoring of the volunteers and evaluation of the program at the end of the academic year. On the other hand, the Department of Education provided a grant of 5 million per school year, selected the public schools from the identified Social Reform Agenda-Secondary Educational Development Improvement Project (SRA-SEDIP) provinces, and tasked its local coordinators to supervise the volunteer teachers. In 1999, the Department of Education of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) also entered into an accord with the University to deploy volunteer teachers in the region's four component provinces. The integration of *gurong pabinungods* within the public educational system was to be a cost-efficient strategy for the Department of Education. A local coordinator of *Pabinungod* in the Visayas commented that the above-mentioned government agency:

“... gets more than what they bargained for with the P5M grant. The amount ... is equivalent to only 50 teachers with basic pay.... The GP program has the capacity to deploy more than 50 GP volunteers with an allowance of P 5,000 and an assurance of quality service from a UP graduate.” (Tobias, 2004, p.2)

Aside from the Department of Education, the program attracted a number of partners like other national government agencies (the Departments of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform), local government units (town and barangay councils), people's organizations, non-government organizations, private companies and foundations, government schools, and concerned individuals. In 2002, the province of Bulacan was the first provincial government unit to sign a three-year agreement with the University to deploy 12 teachers each year in the province's underserved areas. It was also in the same year that the University signed a pact with the World Wildlife Fund-Philippines and the Department of Education-ARMM to realize the following objectives: enhance literacy among the residents of Tawi-Tawi's Turtle Islands; upgrade local teachers' instructional methodologies; and develop a select group of parateachers to promote environmental protection in the area. Another accord was also signed between the University and Assisi Development Foundation to develop educational initiatives for the out-of-school youth, adults, and indigenous peoples in Southern Mindanao and promote a home study program as learning instrument.

The GP program's one-year cycle followed the timetable of a given academic year guided by the following stages:

1. Recruitment (an information drive about the program through poster dissemination, room-to-room campaigns, invitations and personal references);
2. Screening (a series of tests, including a psychological test and aptitude exam, is given to applicants after a panel interview to evaluate an applicant's preparedness for the work);
3. Seminar-workshops on pedagogical and interpersonal skills like team building, community organizing, lesson planning, test construction, gender and development, psychosocial processing, stress and conflict management, demo-teaching;
4. Assignment of teams to sites (two teacher volunteers per area were selected through matching of personalities and assessed needs of the school or community);
5. Selection of school (conducted through school visits, needs assessment, meetings with school and community officials, and by assessing the capability of the partner school/community to sustain the program);
6. Send-off (the swearing-in of volunteers witnessed by University officials and their family members and friends);
7. Deployment (living and work-related arrangements were arranged by the *Pabinungod* staff in coordination with the host school; volunteers were expected to render services related to instruction and community service);
8. Monitoring (conducted by *Pabinungod* faculty monitoring team and representatives from the Department of Education to assess content, teaching strategies and interpersonal relations);
9. Evaluation (self-assessment of the volunteers through reflection essays; debriefing jointly participated in by the *Pabinungod* staff, faculty monitors, and volunteers).

From 1998 to 2003, a total of 246 graduates enlisted as '*gurong pabinungods*'. The breakdown of volunteers per batch is as follows: 47 (1998-1999); 67 (1999-2000); 35 (2000-2001); 38 (2001-2002); and 59 (2002-2003). Volunteers were assigned to as far as Batanes up north and Tawi-Tawi down south. Most of the areas served by the volunteers were situated in the provinces classified as 'underdeveloped' by those who conceptualized the Social Reform Agenda during the term of then Philippine President Fidel Ramos (1992-1998). However,

there were also developed provinces such as Bulacan, Cebu and Iloilo which availed themselves of the program by becoming direct partners of *Pabinungod*. The program reached more than 60 secondary schools in 12 regions and 32 provinces: Cordillera (Abra, Apayao, Mountain Province); Cagayan Valley (Batanes, Cagayan); Central Luzon (Bulacan); Southern Tagalog (Marinduque, Oriental Mindoro, Palawan, Romblon); Bicol (Albay, Catanduanes, Masbate, Sorsogon); Western Visayas (Antique, Capiz, Guimaras, Iloilo); Central Visayas (Bohol, Cebu, Negros Oriental); Eastern Visayas (Leyte, Eastern Samar, Northern Samar, Western Samar); Davao Region (Compostela Valley); Cotabato Region (North Cotabato); Caraga (Agusan del Sur); and Muslim Mindanao (Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi). It is significant to note the risks encountered by several *gurong pabinungods* who were assigned in the territories where rebel movements abound such as the provinces situated in the regions of Bicol, Eastern Visayas, and Muslim Mindanao. In fact, there were reported incidents of communist rebels meeting or recruiting volunteers in the provinces of Sorsogon and Compostela Valley.

Volunteers' Experiences and Narratives

The sources of motivation of graduates enlisting as *gurong pabinungods* are as varied as the number of provinces covered by the program. As culled from the mass of documents reviewed for this paper, seven of the most common cited reasons which inspired the *gurong pabinungods* to volunteer are the following:

- willingness to help others by sharing time, skills and knowledge;
- aspiration to serve the country by working with and for the underprivileged sectors of society;
- as a form of repaying the people whose taxes funded their education in the University (this is most applicable to those more impoverished UP students who had received scholarships and socialized tuition fee grants);
- motivated by their involvement as volunteers of *Pabinungod's* other programs;
- a commitment to serve the nation, and in line with the University's role as lead academic institution in nation-building and social transformation;
- a sense of adventure and craving for new experiences beyond the comfort zone of familiarity and urban dwelling;

- a search for direction and meaning in life (boredom from work led some volunteers to reflect on their existence; new graduates faced the dilemma of what to do after finishing college).

Life in the field for the *pabinungods* was not complete without the problems and challenges that go with it. The basic problem for all volunteers was how to adapt to a newfound community and be accepted by its folk. Socializing with key members of the village and learning the language of the locals were among the most fitting ways to integrate with the community. Generally, the *gurong pabinungods* were able to connect with their respective communities primarily because of their innate sense of sharing as well as the lessons they had learned from the summer workshops on interpersonal relations. However, there were cases where volunteers distanced themselves from the communities they served. A volunteer in Catanduanes dissociated herself from the community because she didn't like the idea of being compared with the previous *pabinungods* in the area (Guarin, reflection paper, 2001). In North Cotabato, a volunteer felt that she was deprived of the opportunity to socialize with the community because of her overprotective foster parents (Cosmiano, reflection paper, 2002). These challenges, however, were eventually dealt with by the abovementioned *gurong pabinungods* in the course of their stay in their respective communities.

The moment the volunteers set foot on the grounds of their host schools, they were exposed to the deplorable conditions of the public educational system: the shortage of classrooms and lack of teaching materials. Absence of electricity and their students' lack of preparation to meet the demands of secondary education at Taganak High School in Tawi-Tawi, however, did not hinder the enthusiasm of a volunteer and his partner (Yuson, 2004). In Palawan's Cuyo Island, one volunteer narrates that she was astonished that her students had to use umbrellas inside the classroom during rainy days (Lopez, reflection paper, 2001). Many volunteers narrated that they felt helpless when they encountered a lack of interest among their students to attend classes given the need to help their parents sustain the family's livelihood. Some volunteers were also dismayed by the fact that the regular teachers neglected to perform their duties. These obstacles challenged the volunteers to become resourceful and creative teachers amidst the inherent limitations of the educational system.

Other problems encountered by the volunteers were relational in nature. Some regular teachers felt threatened by the entry of the *gurong pabinungods* and this caused unwarranted tension between and among school personnel. There were also interpersonal problems between volunteer partners such as the serious case of two *gurong pabinungods* who existed as though they did not know each

other when they both served as teachers at Malinta National High School in Masbate (Gran, reflection paper, 2001). Despite the enormous problems that the *gurong pabinungods* encountered, they carried on their work. For ten months, the volunteers in far-flung areas in the country simply persevered as ordinary mortals imbued with youthful idealism and equipped with a college degree. A faculty monitoring report relates that the *gurong pabinungods*:

“commitment to serve the people as well as to keep the good name of UP sustained the volunteers. The recognition that they have to accept things as they are and that they should not attempt to please everybody helped them get through their volunteer work. The support from the VWNT⁸, their co-volunteers, and their parents saw them through their ten-month deployment. Their students also became a source of inspiration to go on.” (Proceedings of the Fifth Systemwide Debriefing of the *Gurong Pabinungod* Program, 2003, p. 4)

Empowering Schools and Communities

A study of the perceptions and views of five communities in four provinces — Abra, Catanduanes, Compostela Valley and Tawi-Tawi — was conducted by UP psychology professors to document the impact of the *Gurong Pabinungod* program (Legaspi & Aguilin-Dalisay, 2001). This study showed that the volunteers had made remarkable contributions in their fields of instruction and in community work. Tremendous academic benefits were conveyed to the schools in the form of greater learning competencies of students such as knowledge improvement and enhancement of critical thinking with the emphasis on student-centered activities to encourage class discussion and participation. The volunteers were also instrumental in conducting remedial and review classes, and honing the skills and talents of students through interschool academic and cultural competitions. Other benefits brought about by the deployment of the GP volunteers included the development of extra-curricular activities (in performing arts, sports, oration, the school paper), and a renewed atmosphere of vibrancy in school influenced by the volunteers’ vigorous disposition and perseverance. The volunteers’ fellow teachers recognized the value of the program “in three areas including learning about service, learning academic and relational skills, and the deloading of their work” (Legaspi & Aguilin-Dalisay, 2001, p.29). Motivated to serve beyond the schools to which they were deployed, the volunteers had worked with the communities in various ways: a seminar on agricultural productivity resulted in the application of cost-efficient measures among farmers in Bucay, Abra; a clean-up drive in the beach reawakened the community’s role in protecting the environment in San Andres, Catanduanes; projects like planting of trees, construction of botanical gardens,

and a campaign for responsible waste management system improved the community's capability-building in Laak, Compostela Valley; and advocacy for environmental protection done through posters, trainings and other related activities contributed to the community's understanding of the interplay between nature and human beings in Manung-mangkaw, Tawi-Tawi.

One of the GP program's success stories is Sua High School in Matnog, Sorsogon. Situated in the southernmost tip of Luzon, officials of Matnog's seven barangays (Calpi, Coron-Coron, Genablan Occidental, Mambajog, Manurabi, Sinang-atan, and Sua) launched a project titled "Access to Secondary Education through Inter-Barangay Cooperation" in 1999. The *bayaniban* (collaborative) effort of the seven barangays led to the establishment of the Sua High School which opened in the school year 1999-2000. There was an urgency to open a secondary school in the area because most students had to walk for an hour to reach the nearest high school. This explained why most of the residents in Matnog, including barangay officials, did not finish high school. In these villages, a typical family was earning between P1,000 and P3,000 a month, way below the country's poverty threshold of P4,835 a month for a family of five in 2000 (NSCB, 2000).⁹ From the collective view of the barangay officials, the establishment of a high school in their area opened a window of opportunity for their children's future.

In 1999, during the Sua High School's first year, four teachers led by a teacher-in-charge (an administrator of a new school acting like a school principal) handled 110 students. During the school's second year, two *gurong pabinungods* were deployed to Sua High School upon the recommendation of the Department of Education local office in Sorsogon. Seven more *pabinungods* were sent in the next three academic years. The school badly needed teachers: in the second year the students' enrollment almost doubled compared with the previous year. Meanwhile, local teachers in the province of Sorsogon could not be enticed to teach in Sua due to its distance from the town center — it would take a two-hour boat ride from the town of Bulan (in the southern part of Sorsogon) to reach Sua. Another problem was compensation — most of the teachers did not receive their meager monthly honorarium of 2,500 on time from the municipal government. As late as 2003, the majority of instructors were still waiting for their appointment as regular teachers to receive the appropriate compensation package mandated by law.

The Sua High School, led by its teacher-in-charge and the volunteers, organized a teacher training workshop to propagate alternative pedagogical skills beyond Sua during the first year of the deployment of the volunteers. This workshop was intended for basic education instructors residing in the

towns of Matnog and Bulan in Sorsogon. Academics from the UP who served as *Pabinungod*'s faculty monitors became the lead facilitators of the activity which was attended by more than 40 teachers. The whole community was involved because the parents of the Sua High School students prepared the food and took charge of transporting the workshop participants from Bulan to Sua and vice-versa. The partnership between the school and community in staging the activity was very successful. They were able to save money out of the registration fees paid by the participants. The funds were used to construct a water pump and an electric supply post for the high school. The spirit of *bayaniban* by members of the community was also demonstrated in the building of classrooms and paving of roads leading to the school, which was done by the students' parents.

Another fund-raising scheme conceptualized by the GP volunteers was the holding of a cultural show to showcase the talents of the students in the realm of the performing arts. The volunteers were also responsible for the establishment of the first library in the area, which was created through a book drive coordinated by the *Pabinungod* office in Quezon City. Four other major community-related activities conducted by the volunteers were the following: a clean-up drive along the village coast; introduction of non-formal education to the parents; a seminar on reproductive health for women; and a workshop among barangay officials on how to make a barangay council resolution.

In 2002, roughly two years from the time the first volunteers came to the area, Sua received the "*Ini an Sorsogonon!* Barangay Award" (Most Outstanding Barangay Award in Sorsogon) because of the presence of the barangay high school and library, which were also serving six other depressed and underserved communities (Borromeo Motin, personal communication, 2004).¹⁰ Sua's barangay officials expressed gratitude for the role played by the Sua High School and the *Gurong Pabinungod* Program in developing the former sleepy fishing village into a vibrant community. As related by the GP program coordinator who facilitated the deployment of the volunteers to Sua, the workshop organized by the volunteers did not only teach community leaders how to draft a resolution but it also increased their confidence in dealing with other government officials and bureaucrats. In fact, the barangay leaders sent copies of some of the resolutions to the GP coordinator and he witnessed the transformation of the leaders as they lost their timidity and became confident of themselves (Motin, personal communication, 2004).

Some *Pabinungod* volunteers, however, felt that they were not able to meet their own expectations or the community's needs. One volunteer narrated that she considered her stint in Sua frustrating:

“I’ve always thought that Dang and I have been able to bring progressive thinking into the lives of the people in Sua. However, as we near the end of our leave-taking, I’m getting to realize that we aren’t as successful as we have led ourselves to believe. Why so, you might be asking now. Well, I think we’ve miserably failed since Dang and I made (discussed, wrote, and re-wrote) the joint resolution that they’re supposed to submit to the office of Secretary Roco, this after we’ve given them a seminar on resolution-making.

I say that my partner and I have failed miserably because our goal has always been to empower them and not make them depend on others more so on the GPs.” (Geronimo, reflection paper, 2001)

This observation, however, was contradicted by the people themselves, as an impact assessment study revealed (Motin, 2003). There were 100 respondents (50 students and 50 parents) in this study whose salient findings on the effectiveness of the *gurong pabinungods*’ instructional methods and integration into the community include the following:

- 79.1% of the students responded that they were encouraged by the volunteers to participate in class discussion;
- 69.8% of the students answered that student-centered learning techniques used by the *gurong pabinungods* helped them to understand their subjects better;
- 81.4% of the students believed that their volunteer teachers were equipped with the necessary training in instruction;
- 93.8% of the parents believed that the volunteers improved the delivery of basic education in the community;
- 93.8% of the parents responded that the volunteers integrated well with the community;
- 95.8% of the parents wanted the *Gurong Pabinungod* Program to continue.

Many other forms of community work were rendered by the *gurong pabinungods* in the different sites covered by the program. In the town of Sibuyan in Romblon, two volunteers conducted a series of computer tutorials for the teachers and the out-of-school youth. They had the distinction of being the first individuals to introduce the fundamentals of computer technology to the community. In Tawi-Tawi’s Turtle Islands, *Pabinungod* volunteers facilitated learning enrichment activities in coordination with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF)-Philippines such as the following: developing student leaders into parateachers

in promoting the basics of environmental protection advocacy for the out-of-school youth in the area; initiating activities to heighten environmental awareness like a clean-up drive and ecology camp; and conducting a seminar-workshop to orient local teachers on modern learning-teaching processes of basic courses. The WWF-Philippines acknowledged that the one-year stint of the UP volunteers in the community equaled or even surpassed the five-year education work of the organization in the area (Motin, personal communication, 2004).

In Catanduanes, a volunteer to a high school that was described as deprived, depressed and underserved, mentored a group of students to competitively participate in a province-wide academic contest. In the town of Arakan in Cotabato, two volunteers served the community by just being themselves. They were perceived as role models in the community for their dedication to teaching, patience, perseverance and punctuality — a good work ethic uncommon among the teachers at Dal'lag High School. Financial donations were channeled to this high school by some individuals who were pleased by the deployment of the two *gurong pabinungods*. Two GP volunteers from Cotabato trekked to the upland abode of the Manobos and served as volunteer tutors for the Manobo's home study program under the auspices of the Assisi Foundation and Angelicum College. In Bulacan, two GP volunteers worked as full-time teachers cum coordinators of the newly established Talbak High School in the town of San Ildefonso and took it upon themselves to promote the new school by visiting barangays within the area and coordinating with the local officials and district officers of the Department of Education in Bulacan.

In Bicol, two groups of volunteer teachers not only prepared their students to hurdle the University of the Philippines College Admission Test (UPCAT) but also facilitated the provision of financial assistance to UPCAT Diliman qualifiers from the schools where they served. They coordinated with the *Pabinungod* office in Diliman to look for sponsors who gave monetary aid to the qualifiers for the summer and the first semester prior to the availability of financial assistance from the UP. Two of the scholars eventually finished at the College of Engineering; one was unable to complete her course at the School of Economics.

Learning from the Communities

Serving the communities provided potent learning experiences for the *gurong pabinungods*. Several volunteers narrated that they left their communities with heavy hearts because of different reasons. For some, it was painful leaving the people they learned to love. A pioneer volunteer in Sua narrated that he has not forgotten the place where he learned how to swim, and that he made time

to visit his students during their special moments like graduation. While the volunteers aspired to serve the people and to be catalysts of change in underserved communities, they realized at the end of their one year of work that they were the ones being served. This realization is best expressed in the poem of Sheila Brocelango written in Filipino during her stint as volunteer in Cotabato (2001-2002):

AKO AT SILA

Ang akala ko...

ako lang ang nangangailangan

ako lang ang nakatulong

ako lang ang nagbigay

ako lang ang nagturo

ako lang ang nagmabal

at ako lang ang dakila

Nagkamali ako...

nandiyan pala sila

mas marami pala silang naitulong

mas marami silang naibigay

mas marami ang naituro nila sa akin

mas minahal nila ako

at mas dakila pala sila.

This sentiment is shared by Citadel Cosmiano, a volunteer in Cotabato, who felt uncertain about the program's impact on the community:

“Did we do our best? I can only say we tried our best. But perhaps again, the real answer lies on how much we've touched the lives we left and how much they're going to remember.

I know that is a very vague thing to measure because a community takes years to develop, change and sometimes even touch. But an individual's life can very well be changed in ten months. It is us who changed in the end.” (Cosmiano, reflection paper, 2002)

The experience in the field taught the volunteers lessons in life to strengthen character and explore the capacity for continuous learning beyond the parameters

of formal education. Harsh realities in the communities emboldened them to continue working with the underprivileged sectors as teachers in rural areas or advocates of developmental causes. In the summation of the volunteers' responses about the impact of the program on them, it is narrated that the volunteers transformed themselves into:

“more mature, understanding, independent, compassionate, humble, people-oriented, hardworking individuals who are more appreciative of people and of life in general. Furthermore, they have learned how to empathize and interact better with other people, how to give without expecting anything in return, how to value friendship, and how to transform a negative experience into an opportunity for personal growth.”
(Fifth Systemwide Debriefing of the *Gurong Pabinungod* Program, 2003)

Looking for meaning in life had been what motivated many volunteers to enlist in the program. Borrowing a category from Maslow's Need Hierarchy Theory, the need for self-actualization is expressed through the volunteers' desire to serve and longing for a reason to live. A volunteer had left a high-paying teaching job in an exclusive school for girls to serve as a volunteer in Sorsogon and find fulfillment in her chosen profession. Another volunteer assigned in Sua had also left her lucrative job to join the program because she wanted “to feel...alive and not merely existing” (Digo, reflection paper, 2003). One volunteer wrote that her stint in Catanduanes was “probably the best nine months of my life... the many disappointments as well as pleasant realizations saved me from another year of seeming stagnancy and nothingness” (Aseron, reflection paper, 2001). A GP volunteer who had obtained a degree in hotel and restaurant administration but opted not to pursue such career path, was assigned to be a *pabinungod* in Catanduanes. At the end of the ten-month volunteer work, she had a fulfilled sense of self as expressed in the following lines:

“What good is running, if you're on the wrong road? Now I have started to walk in the path I chose. This time, I know this is the right road simply because it feels right being here . . . I have chosen the path of a teacher volunteer” (Barbin, 2000, p.13).

One of the significant gains of the *Gurong Pabinungod* is the propagation of the idea that teaching is offering service. Consciously or unconsciously, the program advocates reclaiming the recognition of teaching as a noble profession in a society where teachers have become degraded as second-class professionals. Change of outlook among several *gurong pabinungods* happened after their stint in the program, as exemplified by the thoughts of this volunteer:

“I used to say that if I were given the chance to list down my choices of profession, I’ll put teaching at the bottom. This was when my English teacher back in high school said I ought to take up education in college. Now after ten months of thinking about endless strategies and having highs and lows of the very exciting and challenging world of teaching, I now think I didn’t deserve that praise from my teacher. Our society still thinks of the teaching profession as the last resort when work comes scarce. Yet Pahinungod taught me the hard way that it can either be the best and worst profession on earth but still deeply satisfying in the end.” (Cosmiano, reflection paper, 2002)

Belief in the nobility of education as a vocation has influenced many volunteers who opted to continue with their work as educators, while some chose to engage in other forms of development work (such as working in non-government organizations or people’s organizations). The volunteers’ reflection papers reveal the nuances of their insights from their experiences in the field. A volunteer in Bulacan realized that volunteerism requires a lot of work and sacrifice to fully serve the community. Another valued the importance of pedagogy contextualized in a community’s sense of worth and identity. One said she learned to value her family when she was deployed in Sua, Sorsogon. She wrote that “I am not really that fond of my family but then now, I think about them most of the time” (Digo, reflection paper, 2003). A *gurong pahinungod* was inspired by the dedication of the government school teachers in her area in spite of the inherent problems in the public education sector (Rivera, 2000). A volunteer who served in Tawi-Tawi’s Turtle Islands, cherished the primordial beauty of life:

“The island was beautiful, all right, but what made it even more unbearably wonderful was that it wasn’t just an island to me, but a community of people where I belonged. And in the same way as with my fellow volunteers in other areas of the country and from different programs as well, we humbly realized what was so simple. It is the simplicity of the fact that strikes me. That what we take for granted ends up to be what matters most.” (Yuson, 2004, p. 3)

To a large extent, the integration of volunteer teachers in the communities they served bred life-changing experiences relevant in understanding one’s philosophy of existence. Capturing this sense of agency, a volunteer shares the impact of her engagement as a barrio teacher in Masbate:

“As an individual, I was greatly enhanced, in more ways than the four years that I spent in the UP classroom. There is no replacement for the lessons that I learned by being part of a community; by sharing myself to people who in my formerly smug existence I would never have thought of, I learned how to teach. I learned how to learn. I learned how to

serve... More than anything, the experience was humbling — I learned more than I taught, I received more than I gave... when I look back, if there is anything that I am most proud of in my life, it was those ten months that I spent as a GP” (Baldo-Soriano, n.d.)

Conclusion

To highlight the role of UP as a public service university, Dr. Ledivina Cariño, the first director of the Ugnayan ng Pahinungod System, emphasized that volunteerism:

“...is an expression of the university’s oneness with, and debt to, society. We do not stand apart from the society that nurtured us, and there are many things we have learned here that we can share, and want to share with others.” (“The Forum Roundtable”, 2004, p.5)

The University, through its students, faculty, staff and alumni has demonstrated its commitment to nation-building and social transformation in various ways since the second decade of the 20th century. It was only in 1994, however, that the University created a formal volunteer service program to fully commit its resources in the service of the nation. The deployment of the *gurong pabingungods* became the focus of the volunteer program from 1998 to 2008.

The impact of the *Gurong Pabingungod* Program is undeniably palliative. It provided interventions in certain communities but not a panacea to the complex problems hounding the Philippine educational system. These interventions characterized by deployment of volunteer teachers and holding of teacher trainings sought to respond to the low quality of education and dearth of basic education teachers in government schools. The rationale of the said program has to be viewed in the context of UP’s role and responsibility as the country’s premier state university.

The question of the program’s efficacy is subject to the assessment of its stakeholders. For the *gurong pabingungods*, some did their part and gave their best efforts in spite of the enormous problems and challenges they encountered in the field. Others were uncertain if they were effective in their work or worse, frustrated for failing to make the expected impact on the community. There was a consensus among the volunteers, however, that withdrawal from the community was not an option for them. Among the volunteers, the sense of contributing to a noble cause served as the most important motivation that sustained their work for almost a year.

Being deployed as volunteer teachers served as a phase for experiment and discernment by individuals who wanted to know more about themselves and about others outside their comfort zones of family, school and friends. Being a *gurong pabingungod* was a sojourn away from what is familiar, convenient and comfortable that led to meaningful outcomes—building character, cultivating relationships, developing schools, and strengthening communities.

Epilogue

The years preceding the UP's centennial celebration in 2008 were turbulent times for *Ugnayan ng Pabingungod's* coordinators, volunteers and supporters. During the incumbency of then UP President Francisco Nemenzo, the implementation of a devolution policy gave a free hand to constituent units to decide whether to continue or discontinue the *Pabingungod* Program. This explains why the said program exists at present only in some of the constituent units such as UP Manila and UP Los Baños. In UP Diliman, the devolution policy was used by then Chancellor Emerlinda Roman to dissolve the unit's *Ugnayan ng Pabingungod* Program and task the colleges to develop their own public service initiatives in consonance with the National Service Training Program (NSTP) Law which was first implemented in 2002.

It was also during this period that a tumultuous debate on whether to retain or dissolve the *Gurong Pabingungod* program reached its height. Advocates of sustaining the program believed that *gurong pabingungods* served as catalysts in transforming schools and communities. The other side viewed the program as a short-term response to a systemic problem of low-quality education typified by incompetent teachers and limited resources. The latter's frame of analysis seemed to resonate with the rationale of then UP President Emerlinda Roman's¹¹, decision not to renew the memorandum of agreement between the national university and the Department of Education pertinent to the deployment of *gurong pabingungods* in underserved public schools. This ended a decade of implementation of a university volunteer program that had nurtured college graduates into servant leaders.

To date, there have been talks among the University's stakeholders to rationalize public and volunteer efforts in Diliman, the UP's flagship campus. The passage of the 2008 University of the Philippines Charter reaffirmed the role of the country's national university as an institution of higher learning devoted to public service. Section 3 of the charter mandates the university to "lead as a public service university by providing various forms of community, public and volunteer service." Pursuant to the provision in the UP Charter and inspired by the initiatives of the *Ugnayan ng Pabingungod*, the present UP System

under the leadership of President Alfredo Pascual¹², has instituted *Padayon* — an office envisioned to ‘synergize’ extension and volunteer efforts of the different constituent units of the UP. *Padayon*’s pilot project was the formation of the UP *Padayon* Disaster Response Team comprising experts from UP Manila and UP Diliman. The team was sent to Iligan City in Northern Mindanao to help victims of tropical storm “Sendong” in December 2011. The establishment of *Padayon* (this Visayan term means ‘carry on’), seeks to emphasize the centrality of public service in UP as an institution and to reassess the devolution of the *Pabinungod* Program. Following this direction, the institution of *Padayon* is a new step in reliving the spirit of *Pabinungod* in the country’s national university.

For former coordinators and volunteers of the *Pabinungod* program in Diliman, the decision to abolish the said program has not deterred them from fostering a culture of service in their communities and work places. Narratives about life-changing experiences and reflections on engaged citizenship abound among the volunteers.

One volunteer narrates that her *gurong pabinungod* experience:

“became my inspiration in supporting causes and organizations that advocate education of children in the rural areas; in eventually pursuing an NGO career and; in still wanting to be of better service to the country” (Corvera, n.d.).

A *gurong pabinungod* who served in Tawi-Tawi eventually returned to his hometown in Quezon Province, to conduct free tutorial classes “for those who can’t afford to pay” (Yuson, n.d.). One volunteer embarked on NGO work dealing with indigenous peoples’ issues (Baldo-Soriano, n.d.). Many others have found work in education and social development-oriented institutions while some have pursued advanced degrees pertinent to education, community development, and social sciences.

Aside from stories about individual volunteers who remain resolute in serving others, there have been collective efforts among UP Diliman *Gurong Pabinungod* alumni towards promoting liberating education and advancing the cause of active citizenship. In 2004, a sizable group of former volunteer teachers established Edukasyon para sa Kinabukasan (EDUK), Inc. a registered non-stock and non-profit organization that aims to “provide Filipinos access to relevant, responsive and quality education and a venue to express their creativity, professional and personal growth and to empower citizens through education.”¹³ To date, EDUK has been setting up community-led educational resource centers, facilitating innovative teaching training workshops, and

spearheading capacity-building mechanisms in nurturing young minds.

Volunteerism in the *pabinungod* sense (altruistic offering of oneself to a greater cause) is, for members of EDUK, at the heart of these initiatives. This brand of volunteerism is best conveyed by one volunteer teacher who wrote:

“While many can do what we do, few choose to do so as willingly and wholeheartedly as U.P. *Gurong Pabinungod* volunteers” (Yuson, n.d.).

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Endnotes

¹This is the working definition used by Voluntary Organizations’ Information, Coordination, and Exchange (VOICE), a group of Philippine-based voluntary organizations which aims to facilitate coordination, research and exchange of ideas in the voluntary sector.

²Dr. Emil Javier was UP President from 1993 to 1999.

⁴Dr. Francisco Nemenzo served as UP President from 1999 to 2005.

⁵The deployment of volunteer teachers in far-flung villages is not entirely new because there are other volunteer organizations which have the same advocacy. A good example is the Jesuit Volunteers of the Philippines (JVP) established by priests of the Society of Jesus in 1979. Since the early 1980s, hundreds of JVP volunteers have been deployed as teachers, community organizers, or catechists, in the country’s different provinces.

⁶Philippines. Congressional Commission on Education (1991).

⁷The comment came from Ms. Magnolia Ariza, *Pabinungod* coordinator at UP Cebu Campus.

⁸VWNT stands for Volunteer Welfare and Nurturance Team, a faculty monitoring group created for the *Gurong Pabinungod* Program.

⁹Data taken from NSCB’s Poverty Statistics— 1997 & 2000 Highlights. According to the National Statistical Coordination Board (NSCB), poverty threshold refers to the minimum household income to meet a 5-member family’s food and non-food basic needs.

¹⁰ Borromeo Motin was coordinator of the *Gurong Pabinungod* Program at the University of the Philippines in Diliman from 1999 to 2003 (interview conducted on May 26, 2004).

¹¹ President Roman was the first woman president of the national university; she served from 2005 to 2011.

¹² The current UP President took his oath of office last year and will end his term in 2017.

¹³ From the organization profile provided by Ms. Karen Panol, current president of EDUK, Inc. former *gurong pabinungod* program coordinator in U.P. Diliman (2000-2003).

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