Higher education in the heart of armed conflict: The pivotal role of student affairs

Maria Aurora Correa Bernardo a,*, Diana-Lea Baranovich b

a Institute for Advancing Community Engagement, Australian Catholic University, 25A Barker Road, Sydney, New South Wales 2135, Australia
b Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling, Faculty of Education, University Malaya, Kuala Lumpur 50603, Malaysia

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Education and conflict
Diversity education
Student affairs management
Higher education environment

ABSTRACT

The issue of conflict confronts many developing countries, hence encouraging a growth of scholarship aimed at determining the effective delivery of education in a conflict situation. This paper suggests that units within higher education, such as student affairs has the potential to contribute to the promotion of peace, by addressing student needs through a paradigm that straddles between compliance and avoidance. The compliance–avoidance paradigm presents student affairs responding to the effects of war in the teaching and learning processes through programmatic and non-programmatic means. Formal programs are interventions adhering to established rules and accepted ethos of practice, provided to address students' developmental needs and foster harmony, while non-programmatic ways refer to strategic actions beyond the formal lines of authority and policy to calibrate the university to the peculiarities of the conflict situation. Ultimately, the study proposes the shift of focus of higher education in context of war from peace education to the needs of the learners and to the unique challenges of educational service providers. Findings were derived from a case study on student affairs practice conducted in a public university in Mindanao, Philippines, using interviews, public documents, and on-site observations as primary data.

© 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Many developing countries are struggling with various forms of war. This then invariably connects the issue of conflict with the condition of poverty (UNDP, 2002). Traditionally, among the fundamental approaches to reconstitute fragmented societies is through education (Paulson and Rappleye, 2007). However, recent studies cite that educational initiatives and policies have made minimal impact in conflict-resolution (Barron, 2011; Milligan, 2005). Nonetheless, by dint of education's established role in human development, the pursuit of the missing gap between theory and practice in education and conflict remains an important agenda to most scholars, educationalists, and international agencies (Davies, 2004).

1.1. Education and conflict – looking for the way forward

Novelli and Lopes Cardozo (2008) exposed that armed-conflict in the global context has been shifting from violent conflict among superpowers to armed-conflict among local and regional sectors of developing countries, and such wars are characterised by cultural alienation. They proposed that a guiding framework for critical research is to begin by problematising the complex interests of key players within the contemporary global education and conflict contexts. On the other hand, Paulson and Rappleye (2007) cited the need for theoretical and epistemological approaches that can actually be used in practice. They also mentioned the overuse of “peace education” as the default intervention and the need to explore alternative models; thereby suggested that the education and conflict conundrum can be investigated beyond the theoretical lens of peace.

A book by Davies (2004) often referred by other scholars points to directions of change that can occur incrementally from the fringes through small, interconnected subsystems. This particular allusion to the complexity theory hints at looking more closely into the details of the lives of individuals (learners and teachers) in a vulnerable learning environment affected by war. In effect, what is needed is to establish an educational system equipped to build peace. Simply put, as Nordveit (2010) would assert, any approach to achieve development must emanate from the way the people define and make sense of their needs.

The gap between theory and practice in the scholarship of education and conflict remains a conundrum. The answer cannot merely be conjured vicariously as one assuming that by dint of higher education's role in the formation of citizenship equates to producing students with a more “peaceful” perspective. The study proposes to address the theory and practice gap is to ground theory from actual practice. This encourages ensuing studies not just to answer the question of how higher education contributes to the
promotion of peace but also to explore other questions that can support the understanding of the link between higher education and conflict. Hence, this study poses the question – how does higher education operate within the context of war? This question aims to generate an understanding of the dynamics of higher education in a situation of war, which can be integral in its relationship in the promotion of peace.

The investigation used the interpretive meanings attached by students, staff, and lecturers through the qualitative methodology of case study. The study used a single unit within higher education, in this case student affairs, to provide a probable microcosm of the entire university-system.

1.2. Armed conflict in the Philippines – the Mindanao story

Developing countries like the Philippines are confronted by localised wars instigated by different interest groups. The popular ones, which have attracted international media attention, such as the kidnapping of foreign nationals and massacres of civilians, were those that happened in the island of Mindanao. Mindanao is one of three major geographical areas and second biggest island of the Philippines. It is the bastion of the Islamic faith, where 90 per cent of the estimated four million Filipino Muslims reside (www.muslimmindanao.ph). In 2008, the national government reported 600,000 displaced families in the entire of Mindanao due to war (Rasul, 2009).

The main root of the conflict has been attributed to the struggle of maintaining cultural and religious identity of Muslim–Filipinos against the dominance of a highly Christianised Philippines. This began when Catholic Spain invaded the Philippines in the mid 15th century, which abated the proliferation of Islam in the Philippines archipelago. Islam came earlier than Christianity to the Philippines in the 14th century through Muslim traders from the neighbouring islands in the Southeast Asian region (Milligan, 2003). The Muslims were able to secure a substantial part of Mindanao from Spanish rule until the end of its reign in the 19th century. The colonisation efforts, however, succeeded in devastating the economies of Muslim communities and creating a social divide among Christians and Filipinos. At present, Muslim Filipinos still feel compelled to adopt a widely dissimilar ethos from the mainstream Christianised Filipino society. In fact, education was an instrument in the past to deepen the gap between Christians and Muslims, among which is the imposition of a Christian-oriented and Manila-generated national curriculum, which at some point presented the Muslims in an unfavourable light (Milligan, 2005). This was exacerbated by the Philippine government’s diplomatic-military relationship with the United States (Khatami, 1998; Milligan, 2005; Rasul, 2009).

There are three main separatist groups that have prominently figured in the armed conflict, namely the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and the radical terrorist group Abu Sayaff. The government was able to enjoin the MILF in the formation of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), but this has been criticised to have only expanded the control of the Philippine government in Mindanao (Milligan, 2005). Aside from the Islamic separatist movement, the current unrest is also caused by clan wars called rido among Muslims themselves (Barron, 2011).

There have been considerable efforts in terms of educational policies implemented by the national government, and financial assistance provided by international agencies for the social integration and economic development of Mindanao. Prominent government initiatives are the expansion of public education, the establishment of madrasas, and the adoption of a curriculum that complies with Muslim laws. International agency such as the World Bank has invested substantially in community-based projects to spur economic development. Evidently, these efforts barely made a dent in addressing the conflict situation or alleviating the socio-political and economic conditions of Mindanao. The Mindanao issue remains to be in a state of flux; the Philippine government, civil society, and international agencies have yet to come up with a viable solution to the Mindanao debacle (Barron, 2011; Milligan, 2003, 2005). The reason being, as Milligan (2003) posited, is that attempts to foster unity and order without due consideration to the inherent, historical, social, and political biases at play, fails to address conflict in a diverse ethno-religious context.

1.3. Student affairs in higher education

Student affairs is claimed to be an American creation dating back to the 18th century with its evolution predominantly shaped by its European colonial history, socio-political revolution of the country, and a concomitant reaction from changes in the general educational system (Hamrick et al., 2002; Rhatigan, 2000). The Philippines’ current educational system is largely shaped by its colonial past (Bago, 2001) and its own socio-political transitions (Wong-Fernandez, 2003). In 2002, in a UNESCO commissioned study on student affairs, the International Association of Student Affairs and Services Professionals (IASASP, 2002), defined the outcomes of student affairs as virtually the same as that of higher education, to wit: (1) high quality, well rounded higher learning experience; (2) better access to higher education for students with varying abilities and backgrounds; (3) better retention and progress toward graduation; (4) higher graduation rate; (5) improved career and employment prospects; (6) a sustainable interest in lifelong learning; and (7) a life as a responsible member and citizen of his community.

A cursory view of literature shows student affairs, as informed by various disciplines, to be primarily composed of management, leadership, and human development (Barr et al., 2000; Hamrick et al., 2002; Miller et al., 1991). Experts asserted that educational functions address student learning in both the formal classroom setting and the informal or outside-the-classroom setting. In fact, the definition of the curriculum itself includes student experiences within the learning environment that are not exclusively gained in the classroom (Bago, 2001). Therefore, the connection of human development, or what was commonly referred to in student affairs language as “student development” to management, is the same as that of theory and action. Student development is the theoretical foundation, and management is the action element (Miller et al., 1991). Most authorities in the field of student affairs admit that both the managerial and human developmental components are essential in the practice of student affairs. Hence, student affairs professionals are indeed educators with a unique role in the educational process (Miller et al., 1991).

Very few existing studies describe student affairs practice in the Philippine setting. Among these studies are three published articles relating to student affairs in the Philippines, which are sourceable online. Bernardo (2008) highlighted the effect of internal and external environments in shaping student affairs’ interventions to encourage student development. Similarly in another published article, Bernardo (2011) presented different practices of student affairs in seven selected public universities all over the country. Guimba et al. (2011) showed the connected to the role of student affairs in developing leaders among its students. Another study on the management of student affairs as perceived by different heads of student affairs was done by Wong-Fernandez (2003). Other related studies are from conferences of the Asia Pacific Student Services Association (www.appssa.info) and its local affiliate, the Philippine Association of Administrators of Student Affairs (www.dlsu.edu.ph), dissertations of Bernardo (2006) and Bonnet (2007) on student affairs practices of Philippine
universities, are mostly attempts to contextualise predominantly western-based knowledge of student affairs in Philippine-setting.

1.4. Overview of the Philippine educational system

The Philippines is comprised of 55 ethnic groups, which speak 171 languages and dialects across the 7,100 islands that comprise the archipelago. The country is divided into three main islands: Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. The National Capital Region (NCR), where Manila, the nation’s capital is located, is in Luzon. Each major island has its own distinguished culture and ethnic identity such as Mindanao, where most of the Filipino Muslims live. Tagalog, the Philippine national language, and English, the medium of instruction (ESCAP, 2000) are considered the country’s official languages. The Philippine educational system is structured from basic education comprised of elementary and secondary school, to tertiary and vocational education. At the time of this research, basic education is comprised of six years, while secondary education is four years of comprehensive studies structured primarily to prepare students for the world of work. After high school, students may opt to pursue a tertiary degree or a technical–vocational program. Student affairs offer guidance and counselling services in the primary and secondary levels. While services vary from university to university, these often consist of counselling, residential services, supervision of student organisations, scholarships, discipline, arts, and athletics.

1.5. Mindanao University – nestled in the heart of the Mindanao armed-conflict

The locality of the study is the province of Cotabato in the island of Mindanao. Mindanao is the second largest island located south of Luzon, where the capital Manila is located. Cotabato is nestled in the landlocked area of central Mindanao. It part of what was then called the Moro Province until 1914, as it was predominantly populated by ethnic Muslim tribes. Village leaders called datu act as the main political and religious leader of these tribes. Such political system called datuism has kept the Muslims united in their struggle against foreign colonisers, and eventually from the military in the secessionist movement. Public information of Cotabato shows that it is composed of 17 municipalities and 543 “legally-created” barangays (or villages), hinting that there are unnamed places within Cotabato that are not covered by the Philippine government, and presumably, may still be under the political system of datuism. The municipal government of Cotabato admitted that the war between the government and the Muslim secessionist derailed past development efforts (http://www.cotabatoprov.gov.ph/about-us/history).

The research site is a public university located in Cotabato, which shall be called hereinafter as Mindanao University or MU. MU is founded in 1954 by a Muslim princess primarily for the education of the Muslim indigenous people. It is known for its agricultural education. It has 12 colleges with 6000 students, 20 per cent of whom comes from Muslim cultural communities.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

Student affairs in higher education was the substantive field of entry. The initial aim of the study was to generate a paradigm of

---

1 The datu is so important that his house (or mansion, as the principal author observed) is surrounded by the shanties of his constituents who serve as human shield in times of war. More so, the sight of a well-built municipal hall bearing the name of the datu manifests the importance of the datu. Adjacent to it is a dilapidated public school building.
situation, the researcher’s entry to the site might not have been possible. Second, the principal researcher’s background as a student affairs practitioner provided an apolitical and culturally neutral image of the study, as well as allowed the emergence of an analysis, which is unencumbered by any theoretical agenda.

3. Findings

The case study generated the following themes: a description of the student affairs organisational structures and programs, which was the original intent of the study. Nascent to the research journey is the emergence of the effects of war to the practice of student affairs and to the learning environment. Concomitantly, data on how practitioners and students cope with the imminence of conflict developed from the discussions about the war’s effects. Evidently, the theme on coping came out as the central theme, which gave rise to the compliance-avoidance paradigm, revealing the combination of the explicit and the tacit practice of student affairs. The explicit practice refers to working within the frame of recognised structures and practices, which are mostly created by government dictum and influenced by a western view of education. On the other hand, the tacit practice refers to the indigenous ways by which practitioners, using their knowledge of the culture and the environment, come up with ways that may not necessarily be in compliance to the explicit structure but one, which is cognizant of the complexities of the milieu.

3.1. The student affairs organisation at the Mindanao University

The student affairs department of MU is headed by a director. Below him are the guidance counsellor, the deputy director, a clerk, and a student assistant. At the time of the study, the department has nine main programs indicated in its official documents, under which are its line functions, namely: guidance and counselling, testing division, career and placement, student organisations, campus ministry, financial assistance and scholarship, publication, student discipline and decorum, and student development. To facilitate the distribution of services of student affairs across the colleges, faculty facilitators were made in charge. These facilitators are responsible for overseeing the delivery of the Group Growth Program, which is a personal development co-curriculum for the students. They likewise assist the director supervise student activities in the colleges. At the time of the study, there are 128 student organisations composed of academic and special interest groups. The director supervises the activities of all these organisations, through close coordination with the student leaders.

Like most public universities, MU has to contend with limited resources. At the time of the study, the government has just reduced subsidies to public universities by 20 per cent and encouraged state universities to explore commercial means in augmenting its budget. This compounds the challenges that a student affairs unit in a university like MU must deal with.

3.2. Effects of conflict in the teaching and learning process and student affairs leadership

There are two entry points of war inside the university; first is through the students (although, it is also likely through the faculty and employees), and second, by default of its public ownership making its facilities accessible to the military.

MU caters to the youth masses of Cotabato, mostly children of farmers, and incidentally those whose lives are affected by the war. Those who have better income send their children to the more cosmopolitan province of Davao or to private universities in Mindanao and Manila. The rest have little choice but to avail of government scholarship in universities like MU. As the faculty adviser of the university student government related (translated from Tagalog):

\[\ldots\text{our students have a lot of problems. They cannot speak or present themselves in public and are not too confident of themselves. It starts with their elementary preparation. We are not like you (referring to the researcher); you can choose your students because you are a private school. Most of your students have no problems; they can go to school and can finish it because they are well supported by their parents. For us here, our elementary schools are also bombed; teachers do not regularly report, facilities are lacking, students are not too exposed (to the outside or modern world). So what will happen when they go to college? How can you change in four years of education the effect of 16 to 18 years of war experience? But even if they lack in other skills, they are mature; they are battle-tested. Thus, they value peace, because of their experience of war.}\]

These types of students as related by the student affairs administrators and the lecturers interviewed come with learning difficulties. The identified main cause was the use of the English language as a medium of instruction. This limits the students’ ability to understand the instructional materials and engage in class discussion. However, more fundamental than English is the reality that most of the students experienced basic education constantly battered by war.

Aside from its effect on the learning environment, managing universities such as MU could also pose some risk for its educators. For example, there has been a reported incident of a lecturer shot inside the campus. It is probable that students of MU are children or relatives of the military and the insurgents. Although the war segregates the parties involved, families who have blood connections to each other populate rural areas in the Philippines. In fact, as the patroness shared, it is not unusual for someone to have relatives in the military and the MILF or MNLF. Therefore, these students have easy access to weapons and may have come from a family environment where violence is a part of life.

Balancing the developmental needs of students with the cultural considerations of some sectors in the university is among the greatest challenges of a student affairs practitioner in a university such as MU. One example is MU’s annual beauty pageant for which each college nominates a candidate. The director of student affairs related one incident involving a Muslim student who dreamt of becoming a beauty queen. When she filed her candidacy, members of the Islamic studies department complained. Such kind of activity is not suitable for Muslim women who are expected to dress conservatively. The student reacted on the complaint by adamantly asserting her right to join the pageant and even rallied the support of the university student government. The director, in carrying what he thinks is a good practice of student affairs of providing students with avenues for self-expression, allowed the student to proceed with her candidacy. A few days before the pageant, he received an anonymous letter warning him that if he allows the Muslim student to proceed with the pageant as candidate, something “bad will happen”. He dismissed the letter as a prank, and a day before the pageant, the Agriculture building where he is a lecturer, was burnt down to the ground. He took the incident seriously and begged the student to withdraw her candidacy, to which she eventually acquiesced.

Incidentally, some MU students come from inter-generational poverty; thus, they may be the first in the family or clan to attend college. Graduation is then perceived as a matter of family honour and is much anticipated, or more so, expected at all cost. One example is from a respondent who at that time served as assistant registrar:
It was when we released the list of graduates, and one student was not on the list because of academic delinquency. This student happens to be the first one who will graduate from college in their family… I saw a jeep full of armed men, the family of the student, camped outside my house, pressuring me to allow the student to graduate.

Another way by which conflict intrudes in the learning environment is through the military. At the time of the research, military presence was obvious as seen from armed soldiers, tanks, and even helicopters in the university grounds. Since MU is a public institution, the military has access to its facilities, including the university hospital, and hostel. Although to some, the military presence is considered normal, there are those who find it as an intrusion to the learning environment. As one Muslim student leader related, he was once a student staff in the security. When his fellow students learned that the Americans will be staying in the university for the Balikatan exercises (a collaborative training program between the Philippine and American army), they protested. He was discharged as a student staff, where he lost his stipend of P1000 a month (USD50), his only source of income to finance his academic needs along with cost of living. He related that his superiors construed his action as one being anti-American and a breach of his duty as a member of the security office. He explained he has nothing against the Americans, only he and his colleagues want to keep the university free from military activities. He further explained, “if the Americans would stay here, then it is possible that we will all be put in danger”.

3.3. Coping with war: the Janus-face paradigm of compliance and avoidance

Student affairs cope with the imminence of war through programmatic and non-programmatic means. Programmes are provided to address developmental needs and foster a sense of a university community. Non-programmatic ways refer to strategic actions beyond the formal lines of authority and policy to calibrate the university to the peculiarities of the conflict situation. The programmatic responses the study focused on are the provision of the Group Growth Program or GGP, networking with industry, supervision of student activities, and the handling of student discipline.

The student affairs offers the GGP, a non-curricular course where students are given short courses on study skills, stress management, communication, and other skills that can be useful in helping them cope better in the university. This is usually delivered in the first year. It is likewise a good entry point for a group of lecturers to be in touch with the real needs of new students. Most of those interviewed in this study have been facilitators of the GGP. The students who were interviewed expressed appreciation for the program as it gave them more confidence in themselves as well insights on how they could direct their lives better.

As the former director related, during her appointment, part of her work is to generate feedback, including from industry that can be used to improve the GGP. She shared that the industry has commented on the need for MU students to develop habits that are appropriate for an urbanised work environment. This includes among other things, learning of social manners, punctuality, ability to express one’s self confidently preferably with the use of the English language, and the use of proper business attire. Preparing students to engage effectively in the mainstream work environment is part of their development as students. Otherwise, the disappointment of unemployment brought by the inability to be accepted in a job, and being discriminated for their Rustic ways can only validate deep-held resentment against the mainstream society.

Another programmatic intervention crucial for student affairs is to promote a sense of community within the university. Students in MU have very limited choices of places to go during their spare time. The university acts as the main institution of the town. Therefore, the students rely on the university to provide venues for socialisation. The most awaited activity of all students and faculty in MU is the Pasikaban (a showcase of sparks, similar to a competition) where student organisations set up their booths and display their programs like in a fair. It is also highlighted by different activities such as sports and cultural festivals. The Pasikaban is much anticipated by the entire university–community and the town as well, and one, which all respondents concur, makes them feel bonded as a community.

The former head of student affairs cited that handling student discipline issue is precarious in MU. There is a need to calibrate the university system and practices to the peculiarities of the conflict situation. This, she claimed, is the tacit function of student affairs in MU. One illustration is a disciplinary problem involving a brawl between a Muslim and a Christian student. She related that handling disciplinary problems are not just a matter of applying what is in the student handbook. Most student affairs practitioners in the Philippines refer to the student handbook in handling student disciplinary problems. Provisions in most student handbooks for public universities are patterned from older universities and more prominent public universities located in Manila.

She further explained that the perception of justice varies according to cultural groups. Thus, it is important to approach situations like these with knowledge of the community and a lot of common sense. She related:

In an ordinary case of student discipline, the colleges handle it; but when Muslim and Christian students become involved in a brawl, they send the case to me. I do not directly handle the case; instead, I ask representation of faculty members from the religious affiliation of both students, and even an external personality who is well respected by the religious groups of students, into an extra judicial dialogue… it does not matter who initiated the assault; sometimes it goes down to counting the amount of injuries both parties sustained… the resolution must be in a form that is acceptable to both parties, and sometimes this may include remuneration.

Another way by which student affairs harmonises the university with the conflict situation is to act as ‘damage controllers’. In the case cited previously on the Muslim student leader who was dismissed from his work, the director and the guidance counsellor immediately looked for a replacement work for the said student outside the university with the same salary. The university seems to operate in a damage-control mechanism, wherein student affairs staff avoids challenging potentially harmful (or erroneous) decision of one administrative arm by finding ways to restore loses (including trust in the university) of the students. This system keeps the integrity of an administrative decision by intervening in ways by which the potentially harmful consequence of that decision is neutralised.

Finally, the study unveiled a glimpse of a psycho-emotional coping strategy through trivialisation of conflict as gleaned from the data. A review of the university’s website will not give any clue to the imminence of armed conflict suffused in its milieu. More so, the foundational intent of the university to provide education to indigenous Muslims cannot be found in any line in the mission and vision statement. It has positioned itself in the increasingly globalised and technologised environment of higher education. In an interview with the Vice President for Academic Affairs, the student leader of the university student government,
and an alumnus, they eagerly extolled the good qualities of the university. However, when the matter of war and the incidence inside the campus related to it were brought up, a seeming discomfort can be traced in their expressions and their common response was “we just take it as part of life”. Apparently, war has been accepted as a norm and trivialisation of its imminence is a means to thrive in this kind of norm. There is more articulation from among the respondents for economic mobility rather than peace – a propensity to deal to what can be controlled and envisioned. Accordingly, the university is held as a sanctuary and a viable means towards the achievement of these aspirations. It seems that members of the university suspend the awareness of war and the concomitant feeling of anxiety in order to function effectively.

This may be further supported by the lack of interest among students on service-learning and activism. The former director shared that the usual activities are cleaning up the university grounds (as there are no janitors) and a particular locality within the immediate community. The adviser for student government explained that students who get into activism easily lose interest, as they realise that they, themselves, are in need of help. Involved themselves in movements such as activism would only jeopardise their chances of finishing college.

4. Discussion

The study underpins the potential of student affairs in higher education to contribute to the promotion of peace by protecting the learning environment from the effects of the war. This protective role is expressed through its formal/programmatic and informal/non-programmatic approaches in addressing student needs. Formal programs are interventions adhering to established rules and accepted ethos of practice, provided to address students’ developmental needs and foster harmony, such as the GGP and the Pasikaban. The non-programmatic ways on the other hand, refer to strategic actions beyond the formal lines of authority and policy to calibrate the university to the peculiarities of the conflict situation, such as the mediation of disputes between the Muslim and Christian students and the job placement given to the terminated Muslim student. The balancing of these efforts increases or at least maintains, student satisfaction, thus lessening the disappointments and frustrations borne from a life defined by a complicated web of poverty, oppression, and being victims of war. Such negative emotions are precarious ignitions, which could easily motivate them to join the warring factions. In effect, the university, through student affairs protect the hopes of the students that higher education could be their way out of poverty and the misery of the war.

The results of the study concur with mainstream and the extant literature on student affairs, that the formal/programmatic and informal/non-programmatic interventions of student affairs are integral ingredients in the achievement of student success and in creating positive student experiences (Dong-hyun, 2003; Flowers, 2004; Gellin, 2003; King and Anderson, 2004; Littleton, 2002). These reinforce that student affairs plays a pivotal role in protecting and sustaining student development amidst unconventional situations such as war.

Further analysis of the results brings to fore the coping behaviour of the people in the university as they deal with the imminence of war. The effect of conflict in the learning process finds connection in the literature on psychology, which states that people who are directly exposed to war terrorism or war torture, are likely to develop some sort of stress disorder (Jaycox and Foa, 2001) that will likely affect their intellectual and psycho-emotional development (Taylor, 2006). Thus, these affected individuals for that matter, would be in need of immediate psychological intervention (Mitchell, 2003). However, as the case of MU, due to limited resources and perhaps lack of knowledge of the need for psychological intervention, the general means of coping is through what trauma psychology refers to as ‘avoidance’. Avoidance as a means of psychological coping is characterised as veering away related thoughts, feelings, or conversations that remind them of war (Asmundson et al., 2004), which in this case was manifested by the following: (1) seemingly cooperating with hierarchical decisions whilst undertaking interventions to damage-control; (2) resorting to extra-judicial means in settling disputes among critical student sectors; and (3) trivialisation. These practices of avoidance exist juxtapose the explicit practice of compliance to the mainstream acceptable principles of good practice and the upheld hierarchy of the organisation. In effect, revealing a paradigm of practice that combines compliance and avoidance where an ethos of practice manifests observance to the mainstream and acceptable practice while tacitly and informally creating interventions that are responsive to the complexities of the environment. This resonates to what Davies (2004) asserted that educators and students are capable of finding creative ways to sustain and protect the learning environment amidst a situation of conflict.

Adaptation is crucial to survival in times of war (Davies, 2004), and student affairs adopt strategies that balance compliance to established rules of practices, as well as respond to the needs of the students. It uses its strategic proximity to student organisations to carry out its explicit and tacit functions. This strategic proximity provides the knowledge of the students’ needs and concerns, which are crucial information in navigating through the intricacies of educating in a besieged context.

The strength of the compliance–avoidance paradigm is its groundedness on the realities of the war context. Its conceptual fluidity embraces the natural psychosocial adaptation of the people without the pre-judgement that such approach is not cognizant of “acceptable” theories of education and management. Compliance and avoidance are behaviours that were often deemed as weaknesses as these do not address the root of the problem but only perpetuate the dysfunctional status quo. The behaviour of avoidance comes with the shade of deception and compliance may connote lack of integrity. However, it is hard to make such judgment in a precarious situation where a ripple can turn into a violent encounter. The student affairs practitioners are making the rules depending on the stakes and the players. The goal is not to follow the rule or the law, the goal is to maintain order, and perhaps a certain form of harmony so that the learning process can proceed uninterrupted. On the other hand, the weakness of the model is that real transformation is hindered from happening, particularly from the students, the faculty, and the other leaders within the university. In the case of MU, the head of security who fired the Muslim student remains unaware of the implication of his decision; the Islamic faculty who protested against the beauty pageant is kept from understanding the dynamics that is going on in the new generation of young Muslims; the students and their parents involved in the brawl lose the opportunity to genuinely understand each other’s view of justice because everything was amically settled by remuneration. Every incident in which the compliance–avoidance paradigm was able to manage or resolve buried the transformative element of the crisis into layers of palliative solutions.

Taking the compliance–avoidance paradigm into a higher level is the challenge to authentically dialogue with and amongst the people regarding the need to understand each other’s uniqueness and find within the crisis a view of their shared humanity. This may be easier said than done, but nonetheless worth reflecting on.
5. Conclusion

Higher education, regardless of its contexts, is assumed to be among the main protagonists for social construction. This is evidenced by the inclusion of community engagement as among its major goals, along with teaching and research. However, the shape and direction of higher education are as much as a product of the wider social context as it is its precursor (Lopez and Scott, 2000).

The results of the study unveil that higher education in a situation of conflict operates in an eclectic mix of roles as facilitator of peace, an inadvertent instigator of conflict, as well as victim of the war itself. This challenges questions aimed at defining the role of higher education in the promotion of peace, and proposes a shift of focus to addressing the needs the learners. Thus, the question can be posed as – how can national and local policies, educational leadership and resources make higher education responsive to the needs of students in conflict situation? This then directs energies towards understanding the unique situations of students who are victims of war and designing a learning environment that is appropriate to their condition. Notwithstanding is the recognition that access to the knowledge of student needs is through the service providers such as staff and lecturers who are also victims of the war. This follows that resource and policy support and approaches for evaluating university performance are distinguished from the mainstream higher educational system.

In effect, the study underpins that the role of higher education in promoting peace is not directly but obliquely through its ability to respond to the needs of its students and concomitantly to the challenges faced by educational service providers such as university teaching and non-teaching staff. The baseline of these needs is related to economic survival, safety, and security within the learning environment.

Concretely, an approach for education in a conflict situation can be drawn from the compliance–avoidance paradigm of MJ. This approach must have the ability to encompass the nuances of the conflicted context, the needs of the students, and the demands of the university for public accountability of its quality. The study proposes the use of a paradigm that leans towards a diversity-oriented education. Diversity here will be used as the factor that enriches the learning environment (Paulson and Rapleye, 2007) and as a strategic condition from which the promotion of growth and cultural change can be encouraged. It could be positioned as one which can be instrumental in their gainful employment in the globalised workforce, consequently, motivating them to engage more effectively with each other as reflected in the positive reception of students with the Group Growth Program. The lecturers and educational leaders could stand well to shape their styles and practices that recognise the diversity and not insist on practices that are made for a culturally homogenous learning environment.

The emergence of the critical role of student affairs in the context of conflict was not recognised by existing scholarship of student affairs and exacerbated by the lack of local scholarship to re-contextualise and even re-create predominantly western theories of education that are aligned to the unique realities of developing countries. To date, the volume of published Philippine literature on student affairs is minuscule compared to the academic discussions done by western scholars, particularly the United States. There remains a dearth of scholarship in conceptualising and theorising student affairs and student development from the standpoint of the Philippines and developing countries’ experience. The most prevailing difference perhaps of Philippine student affairs to its counterpart, say, the United States, is that there is no singular effectiveness model that can be prescribed. As most developing countries, the Philippines needs to reflect on the various sub-contexts within its region. Bernardo (2011) cited that there exists varying models depending on locality (rural and urban), socio-political situation, and academic focus (e.g., agricultural, education), and the need to merge student affairs with other academic disciplines such as intercultural education. Thus, views on the role of student affairs, as embraced by bodies like the UNESCO (IASAP, 2002), necessitate the incorporation of the protective role of student affairs in complex learning situations such as war.

Ultimately, the compliance–avoidance paradigm proposes the shift of focus of higher education in context of war from peace education to the needs of the learners and providing resource and policy support to student affairs practitioners taking into considerations their condition as victims of war. However, the compliance–avoidance paradigm offers a mere conceptual model of within the context of the Mindanao conflict. Future studies may perhaps explore a grounded theory model where other sites (data) are included to represent different types of conflict situations (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

The study concludes with an assertion that the pursuit of peace requires the conglomerate of the multifarious abilities and insights of theorists, practitioners, government, civil society, international agencies, and fellow educationalist from various streams of disciplines. It demands that the resolution of conflict need not be directly predicated on peace but would have to connect with the basic needs of the people and their way of constructing their own vision of possibilities.

References


Web references
http://www.cotabatoprov.gov.ph/ (accessed 06.03.12).
http://www.muslimmindanao.ph/Islam_phil2.html (accessed 07.05.11).