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## **PNU Alalay, Katuwang, & Alagang Pangkawani (AKAP):** *A Proposed Mental Health Program (MHP) for PNU Employees*

**Teresita T. Rungduin, Sheila Marie P. Dela Peña, Lyndon S. Talatac, and Maribel C. Gerundio**



***The Proposed Mental Health Framework for PNU Faculty and Staff***

### **Executive Summary**

The Philippine Normal University (PNU) endeavors to integrate and advocate mental health initiatives in its human resource and organizational development policies and programs. One such initiative is the development of the PNU-AKAP Mental Health Program where the acronym AKAP (a Filipino term for hug, or embrace that gives warmth, comfort and protection) stands for Alalay, Katuwang, & Alagang Pangkawani.

The program is designed to ensure that every PNU employee is consciously aware, advocates for, and receives support to strengthen their mental health.

The program developed by the authors is based on the PNU-AKAP Mental Health Framework that has three components. First, Alalay pertains to the University provisions on monitoring (pagsubaybay) and looking after employees' mental health wellness to ensure (paninigurado) that the services are relevant and customized to their needs. Second, Katuwang covers University efforts on promoting social welfare and providing social support (pagbabalikatan) for employees' different concerns, create a culture of mutual respect, inclusivity, empathy, cohesiveness, oneness and solidarity. This also represents the collaboration (pagtutulongan) of



Educational Policy Research and Development Center (EPRDC)  
317-1768 loc 751 | eprdc@pnu.edu.ph | www.pnuresearchportal.org

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different units, offices and department in the University as well as its collaboration to other institutions that cater to the mental health needs of the employees (pakikipag-ugnayan). Lastly, Alaga comprises of the in-house mental health program, services, workshops, activities and provisions that the University offers throughout every academic year and throughout the stay of the employees in PNU.

Their experience in conceptualizing and developing the PNU-AKAP program provided the authors insights for some recommendations in the development and implementation of mental health programs (MHP) in HEIs: (1) suitable conceptual or theoretical grounding; (2) collaborative interactions among key units; (3) alignment with relevant policies and guidelines.

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The pandemic brought about a number of mental health issues among people from different age groups, economic strata, and cultural and social background. These issues are aggravated by health concerns because of COVID 19 and the need for support in easing into school and work. Specifically, support is needed in addressing altered social and working environments, policies in social distancing and mandatory lockdowns, and the general anxiety and fear of the future. These concerns prompted a recalibration of how mental health in the workplace is valued and implemented. Academic institutions had taken steps to support the health and well-being issues of students and its personnel. The focus of these institutions were to develop measures for student and personnel safety in an outbreak, improve safety measures to decrease disease transmission, and provide for the psychosocial needs of the students and university staff through counseling (Nurunnabi, Almusharraf, & Aldeghaither, 2020). Services provided by universities in the Philippines include virtual counseling, mental health teleconferencing, and referral mechanisms to psychologists and psychiatrists (Toquero, 2020). Moreover, the studies recommended a holistic and context-based approach in addressing mental health concerns of the working force in general, and university personnel in particular. The recommendations provided significant grounding for the development of the PNU AKAP Mental Health Program.

The *PNU-AKAP Mental Health Framework* is based on studies about Filipino wellness or *ginhawa*. Rungduin (2019) conceptualized *ginhawa* as a construct that authentically describes the person's current state of mental health. The latter is attributed to different components such as *udyok* or the existential reasoning that moves one to attain *ginhawa*, *uri* which can either be *panloob* (personal satisfaction) or *panlabas* (satisfaction on social relationships), *konteksto* that describes the circumstances that shape how one perceives own state of *ginhawa*, and *daloy* (harmony between the two *uri* of *ginhawa*). Bautista (2021) furthered that mental health is not just the absence of mental illness but being in the state of wellbeing and *ginhawa*. Thus, a person who experiences *kaginhawaan* are likely to possess *sigla* (physical energy to overcome life challenges), *gana* (having an appetite and enthusiasm for life activities), *gaan* (being at ease), and *ligaya* (the feeling of joy, peace and sense of purpose). Samaco-Zamora and Fernandez (2016) claimed that Filipino wellness is rooted in family. Filipinos typically feel *ginhawa* if they are able to provide for the basic needs of their family. They have identified four categories of *kaginhawaan* such as having good economic condition, having an occupation, psycho-emotional well-being and spirituality. These literatures suggest that to achieve one's functional and prime state of mental health, the following must be achieved: employees' *kabatiran* (awareness), *kaginhawaan* (feeling light and at ease), *kaligayahan* (feeling of joy and optimism), *kapanatagan* (feeling at peace and security), *kahustuhan* (completeness, contentment and satisfaction), *kalusugan* (perceived good health) and *kaisahan* (feeling of connection, belongingness, and oneness). These outcomes are the target goals of *PNU-AKAP MHP*.

The PNU likewise upholds having a healthy and productive workforce. With the primary goal of promoting overall mental wellness and provision of an inclusive, conducive, and supportive work environment, the PNU-AKAP MHP was designed to support the implementation of R.A. 11036 which shall be integrated as a regular HRD program. Laws related employee rights such as RA 7277 (The Magna Carta for Persons with Disability), and RA 11313 (An Act Defining Gender-Based Sexual Harassment in Streets, Public Spaces, Online, Workplaces, and Educational or Training Institutions) were also embedded in the developed MHP.

The PNU AKAP MHP is an output of a committee formed to create a CSC-aligned mental health program. The members of the committee were the Director of the Human Resource Management and Development Services



Office, Dean of the Office of Student Affairs and Student Services, a guidance counselor, and the presidents of the faculty union and administrative employees association. In the development of the program, the experiences of PNU Employees and inputs from consultative meetings with faculty and employee associations were also considered. Suggestions and initiatives to better address faculty and staff concerns were discussed which were highlighted in the specific activities in the program.

The developed program seeks to provide equal and non-discriminatory access to mental health care and integrate them into the basic health services for all university employees. Guided by the CSC, DOLE and DOH Guidelines for the Implementation of Mental Health Policies and Programs, the MHP for PNU Employees aims to achieve the following:

1. Raise awareness, prevent stigma and discrimination, provide support to workers who are at risk and/or with mental health condition and facilitate access to medical health services;
2. Strengthen effective leadership and governance for mental health by, among others, formulating, developing, and implementing University policies, strategies and programs relating to mental health jointly prepared by management and employees' representatives;
3. Develop and establish a comprehensive, integrated, effective, and efficient MHP responsive to the psychiatric, neurologic, and psychosocial needs of the faculty and administrative staff;
4. Integrate mental health care in the basic health services for PNU faculty and administrative staff; and in the human resource systems and processes; and
5. Integrate strategies promoting mental health in the workplace, promoting their well-being towards healthy and productive lives.

The Mental Health Program (MHP) aims to operate based on the following guiding principles:

1. An employee at risk shall not be discriminated in any form, regardless of status, age, sex, sexual orientation and gender identity, creed or religion.
2. Faculty or Administrative staff members of the University are expected to carry out workload that is within their mental and physical capacity. Those identified to have mental conditions, have undergone treatment and recovered shall not be prevented from returning to work provided that they present a fit to work certification from an accredited physician/ psychiatrist.
3. The university's policy on confidentiality shall be clearly communicated and understood by all workers.
4. The right to health as enshrined under the Universal Health Rights is promoted, protected, fulfilled through the MHP. According to WHO, the following approaches could be done to promote employee wellness: (1) reduction of work-related risk factors, (2) development of the positive aspects of work and the strengths of employees, and (3) address employee mental health problems.
5. To protect and promote mental health in the workplace, health and safety policies and practices will be implemented. This includes the identification of employee distress, development and promotion of employee support and mental health services; securing participation of employees in decision-making to instigate a feeling of trust, mutual respect, empowerment and involvement; creation of organizational culture that advocates for healthy work-life balance, supports career progression of employees; and that recognizes and rewards employees hard work and contributions.

The guiding principles are based on the laws concerning persons with disability (RA 7277 and RA 10524); mental health (RA 11036); DOLE DO No. 208, and data privacy (RA 10173). Moreover, the guiding principles cover



employee's ingress to egress from the university and includes testing, counseling and well-being development programs. The following strategies were developed from the guiding principles:

1. Prevention, promotion and information and education campaign on mental health and well-being
2. Treatment and recovery. Provision of support to faculty and administrative staff with mental health issues at work by providing intervention, treatment and referral.
3. Integration of mental health in human resource development and management policies and programs.
4. Establishment of institutional networks and referral systems.
5. Capacity-building for MHP administrators in the University.
6. Review of working conditions of the employees

The strategies are distributed across the various units of the university including the faculty and employee associations to collaborate and provide services like training, mentoring and coaching sessions, and consultations with partner health institutions. Moreover, the MHP has specific implementation mechanisms for employees identified without mental health concerns and those with diagnosed mental health concerns. The PNU AKAP program is in its early stages and will still evolve to accommodate the evolving needs of the employees as they journey through life changes brought about by the pandemic and other factors.

### Key Recommendations

Their experience in conceptualizing and developing the PNU-AKAP MHP provided the authors insights to make the following key recommendations in the development and implementation of mental health programs (MHP) in HEIs:

1. **Suitable conceptual or theoretical grounding.** Higher education institutions must consider developing their mental health programs based on conceptual frameworks, theories and studies that provide adequate grounding for the components of the programs. The use of Filipino frameworks and theories may be considered to provide stronger contextualization. In the PNU-AKAP, the program was based from the concepts of *ginhawa* and other related indigenous constructs.
2. **Collaborative interactions among key units.** The development of a MHP will not progress without collaboration between key units in the university. In PNU, the authors who worked together to develop the program came from various units (student services, human resources, representatives of the faculty union, and administrative employees association). Consultations made with other key stakeholders (e.g., faculty union, employee association) were also critical to ensuring that the development of the MHP is successful.
3. **Alignment with relevant policies and guidelines.** Mental health programs must be aligned with the relevant laws, government circulars and other institutional policies. The PNU-AKAP program was designed by consulting relevant national and University policies.

In summary, it is time that Philippine HEIs establish their own mental health programs. HEIs 1 should develop their internal policies to ensure program development, implementation and sustainability. It is also important for the Commission on Higher Education, Civil Service Commission, and other government



agencies to provide policy and administrative support to the mental health programs of both public and private universities and colleges. Lastly, it will also be important that lessons and insights gained from the development, implementation, and evaluation of MHPs be utilized to further enhance policies and programs for the promotion of mental health in the workplace.

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### **About the Authors**

**Teresita T. Rungduin** is the Dean of the Office of Student Affairs and Student Services, Philippine Normal University (PNU).

**Sheila Marie P. Dela Peña** is a guidance counselor at the Office of Student Affairs and Student Services, PNU.

**Lyndon S. Talatac** is a BSMA Psychology and Counseling student in PNU.

**Maribel C. Gerundio** is the Director of the Human Resource and Development Services, PNU.

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