



UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO QUALITY TERTIARY EDUCATION IN CENTRAL LUZON: AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract: The study aimed to offer a set of recommendations which education administrators and management practitioners may refer to as guide for the continuous delivery of quality and relevant education. It hopes to be a critical endeavor to review the still vast and uncharted territory of administration and governance of education in the country, especially on how state universities and colleges have fared in the implementation of RA 10931.

The results indicated that the implementation of RA 1093, inclusive of SY 2021 and 2022, was basically successful despite of fallbacks. Notable was the shift from CHED UniFAST to DBM GAA which indicated a prompt resolution in pursuit of excellent governance, and in implementing such a law. Even if the law has been passed and implemented, fallbacks and flaws are inevitable. Identifying the challenges and issues that emanated from these flaws is a positive and welcome attitude among the implementers and process owners, as well as stakeholders. Free education leads to building knowledge economy, as long as the academic institutions would strive hard to provide proper values dispositions among the members of the institution.

Based on the findings, the study recommends that SUCs continue to harness the implementation of RA 10931 by enhancing collaboration and lessons learned through established networks. The enhancement can be backed up by a more aligned practices vis-à-vis with the unique operations of each school like school calendar synchronicity among SUCs for this will give way to easier process management to external stakeholders connected to RA 10931. SUCs could also lobby for revitalizing the IGP, or the corporatization of state colleges and universities, for the purpose of augmenting budget capability which will give way to more benefits not only to the students but as well as to faculty and all personnel.

Index Terms - administration and governance, free higher education, state universities and colleges.

I. INTRODUCTION

As the global economy started to pick up from the devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic including, among many other pressing concerns, the instability in the global market brought about by the multiplier effect of the ongoing conflicts between countries elsewhere, countries keep on striving to build back better in the new normal. While countries' economy slowly bouncing back and redeem itself, other sectors of society are also struggling to be back on track, especially those which are essential and rightfully belong to humanity's essence and existence. One of which is, the education sector, prompting scholars to propound on topics related to it, especially on the tertiary education.

Building upon the most recent data where the Philippine's median age is 24.5 against a global value of 30.3 years, the country is in a vantage position to capitalize on its young human resources based on the World Population Dashboard Philippines (unfpa.org). Putting this big picture at the front and center of the development efforts, which includes among others, our academic institutions, together with the authorities and concerned government agencies, we could probably say that we can move forward with a good sense of direction. SUCs, LUCs and other higher education providers could, indeed, capitalize on our young, dynamic, and promising citizens given the right platform for education and the quality services that come with it.

The United Nation Educational Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (Abdrasheva, et al., 2022) reported that Higher Education Institutions (HEI) around the world are likely to move forward with focus on the pedagogical environment like enhancement of digital technology, blending it to face to face modality, as its emphasis. Also, the impact of the pandemic in higher education has been diverse, profound, and different for each institution and country, evident in the rapid return to in-person teaching and learning and the stabilization of enrollment patterns. Hence, the mediating role of economic and financial concerns of college students and their access to tertiary learning, is also a compelling paradigm worth examining.

For instance, a recent survey in the United States found that of the 2,000 undergraduate respondents, 1,550 will have student loan debt when they graduate. This resulted to the cost of tertiary education, including tuition and fees, lodging, transportation, school supply needs, among others. Among third world country college students, lack of financial resources

due to economic constraints of family (Daud, Mat & Yusof, 2018) was found the major factor for students' difficulty in finishing a college degree.

But, according to World Population Review (2023) there are 22 countries around the world that offers free tertiary education to its citizen and even to foreign nationals. This construed that societies and its governments still give importance to younger generation earning a degree.

In the Philippine context, earning a college degree is an achievement not only of the student, but more attributed as the parents' success. Despite financial difficulties, parents, and or siblings who are already earning, would exert effort to secure an education. On the other hand, students would resort to part time jobs, or scholarship grants to ease the burden. This Philippine government was not naïve of this reality vis-à-vis upholding that access to quality higher education, and education in general, should never be denied to every qualified and deserving individuals.

Moreover, the nation's future is linked to the quality and readiness of its youth to the requirements and demands of the real world. Education in general provides for quality of life that are at stake to our youths who will then become the new set of skilled, knowledgeable professionals, leaders, managers, and influencers in the world ahead.

The youths are a country's best hope for the future. The nation's young, not its natural riches, is where its true prosperity lies. There is no greater investment made by a country than in the upbringing of its younger age group. The 1987 Philippine Constitution's Article II, Section 13 stipulates that "The State shall promote and preserve the physical, moral, spiritual, intellectual, and social well-being of the youth in nation-building." The younger generation of today will be encouraged to participate in public and civic issues and will be taught patriotism and nationalism.

Given that, one important legislation made in the most recent years in the history of Philippine Higher Education is the enactment of the law that provides for this purpose.

The Philippines being a developing country is noted for having implemented this free higher education program on a massive scale. Such an initiative perhaps takes into account the provision of quality, accessible and equitable education has been a long standing undertaking in many countries all over the world, and efforts towards its attainment have been the subject of various policies, both of many governments and accrediting bodies. Having made salient strides, the policy environment now focuses its attention towards the realization of universal access to quality education. After all, there is no denying the fact that with increased access comes a more inclusive social mobility, a role that has been reserved to higher education institutions (Symaco & Tee, 2017).

For its part, the Philippine government has answered the challenge to further guarantee the Filipinos' inalienable right to quality education through the passage of Republic Act 10931, also known as the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act of 2017. Cognizant of the need to elevate the caliber of the country's higher education (HE) in order to become responsive to the demands of the knowledge society, RA 10931 hopes to allow marginalized yet qualified students to partake of the fruits of economic prosperity and progress. As Denny (2013) emphasized, higher education generally brings substantial financial and other benefits.

Section 2 of RA 10931 states that it is "the policy of the state to protect and promote the rights of all students to quality education at all levels. Therefore, the State shall take appropriate steps to make such education accessible to all." Based on this policy declaration, the State, through this law, provides "adequate funding and such other mechanisms to increase the participation rate among all socio-economic classes in tertiary education," and ensures the "optimized utilization of government resources in education."

The passage of the law is a milestone for the Philippine government, as it started to offer free tuition for tertiary education in public universities, and eventually enacted into law the no tuition and miscellaneous fee scheme. The potentials of the law are promising, providing among others the benevolent "voluntary opt-out" route for able-to-pay students, a student loan program which provides opportunities for enhancement, and space for improvement in education both through equity and quality of access to education (e.g. a single, high standard of admission test to college (Sicat, 2018).

Although the trend in most countries as regards financing universal higher education institutions (HEIs) goes towards the other end (e.g. in Korea, the central government is lax in legalizing financial support for public universities (Kim & Park, 2016); in England, the challenges of the free college era served as enough evidence to highlight that government financing of higher education caused strain on resources and that enrolment increase brought by more access to HE did not necessarily result to equity (Murphy, et al., 2017)), it is still an interesting matter to render the reasons why the Philippines opted to implement a tuition-free higher education.

Notwithstanding the trend in other countries pointing towards the opposite direction of tuition-free HEIs, and the "birthing pains" associated with the initial implementation of the said Act, this paper proposes to offer an exposition of the lived experiences of recipient HEIs for the past three (6) years since the enactment of the law. In particular, the focus will be on the experiences of the Unified Student Financial System for Tertiary Education (UniFAST), the state universities and colleges (SUCs), and the student beneficiaries of the law. As early as its first year of implementation, a number of issues relative to the law's implementation have already been reported by the Secretariat of UniFAST, the government's arm in charge of the assistance mechanisms that give additional support to eligible, financially-disadvantaged students. It is tasked to reconcile, improve, strengthen, and expand all government-funded modalities of student financial assistance programs for tertiary education in the country.

These issues include delayed payment to the SUCs, and the uniformity in the fees paid, thereby affecting the SUCs' previous source of income used in its development projects. In the case of RA 10931, it is the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), the Department of Budget and Management (DBM), and the boards of regents (BORs) of public universities who are tasked to implement the Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRR), which ideally should recognize each school's peculiarities (Vallejo, Jr., 2017).

It is worth noting, therefore, to determine what implementation strategies have been adopted by the key implementing actors of state universities and colleges (SUCs), and the manner by which they implemented such strategies. These, according to Ortiz, et al. (2019), serve as ample sources for further studies.

A frequent concern is the atypical needs of SUCs when it comes to the improvement of their physical facilities, as well as their instructional infrastructure and pay of faculty improvements (Sicat, 2018). And as already being felt, a slight budgetary

squeeze could disrupt, if not distract, the government's prioritization of higher education funding. This could be a very gloomy prospect for a country struggling hard to meet up to globalization's standards for a responsive quality education.

Being one of the stakeholders in an academic environment, particularly in public higher education system, the researcher has observed, first-hand and from various vantage points, the immediate social, administrative, governance, and fiscal impacts of the implementation of RA 10931, most especially among SUCs that suddenly face the decrease, if not absence, of their fiscal autonomy and independence to collect or even to adjust tuition fees to their needs (Sicat, 2018).

In an effort to build on the strategic actions of SUCs relative to the law's implementation, and help curtail the issues that have emerged in the process, the study will endeavor to offer an analysis of how SUCs have adapted to the challenges posed by the implementation of the law. The information elicited is foreseen as baseline data for further enrichment of governance,

Consequently, the study emphasizes the best practices in implementation, particularly when it comes to SUCs' fiscal administration and governance.

Finally, guided by the experiences, modest achievements, and lessons learned in higher education financing from other parts of the world (Duerrenberger & Warning, 2017; and Chapman & Doris, 2017), the study proposes to offer a set of recommendations which education administrators and management practitioners may refer to as guide for the continuous delivery of quality and relevant education. It hopes to be a critical endeavor to review the still vast and uncharted territory of administration and governance of education in the country, especially on how state universities and colleges have fared in the implementation of RA 10931.

Theoretical framework

In a sociological standpoint, the resource-dependence theory (RDT) mainly applies to business firms which can be used to analyze how they behave as they engage with others in their environment to acquire resources (Archibald, 2017). However, the study may also benefit if it uses it as a theoretical framework, especially since it has been used before in studies about public higher education institutions (Fowles, 2014; Maltesta & Smith, 2014; Blekic, 2011; Wangenge-Ouma, 2011; and Coupet, 2013). After all, the basic premise of RDT, according to Nienhüser (2008), is that "dependence on 'critical' and important resources influences the actions of organizations" especially in the aspects of decision making and implementation. Another reason why this as a theoretical framework worthy to be used in this paper is what Davis (2010) described as its three core ideas, namely: "(1) social context matters; (2) organizations have strategies to enhance their autonomy and pursue interests; and (3) power (not just rationality or efficiency) is important for understanding internal and external actions of organizations" (p. 5).

Worthwhile to mention is Blekic's (2011) dissertation which focused on "the role of the political and fiscal environment in which institutions of higher education operate and offers institutional theory as a basis to explain resource dependence in public higher education." There is no denying that trends in recent years involving public higher education had shown that although SUCs are "creatures of the state", their autonomy, both fiscal and administrative, have been historically enjoyed by many especially when it comes to resource acquisition.

However, due to the pressure brought on by coercive isomorphism, or the change that "stems from political influence and organizational legitimacy, often conveyed through laws, regulations, and accreditation processes (or outside agency requirements)" (Caravella, 2011), many are now faced with finding measures to cope with the changes being demanded or remedy the negative effects that government resource dependence may have on institutions, especially on public higher education (see Coupet, 2013). Resource dependence, as prompted by laws such as RA 10931, has shown what Maltesta and Smith (2014) posited as a changed fiscal landscape, an uncharted arena for most public and non-profit managers. At such condition, they have to seek for new strategies because resources are often limited; this is where RDT has been known to give "valuable guidance for managers who want to understand the considerations and consequences relevant to different types of inter-organizational partnering."

One such strategy involves resource diversification which may seem to be a logical response to mitigate the negative effects of resource dependence. On the contrary, however, the study of Wangenge-Ouma (2011) concluded that there are combinations of factors like small domestic markets and capacity related challenges which affect the outcomes of any measure aimed to diversify many African universities' income capacity. As with the case of SUCs in the Philippines, certain regulatory prohibitions associated with financing as provided for in RA 10931 also makes revenue diversification as a moot and academic option. Thus, an appropriate application of RDT is necessary because disadvantageous dependencies brought on by external factors (in this case, RA 10931) needs to be scrutinized so appropriate sound measures to address the needed revisions/amendments to RA 10931 and its IRR may be proposed.

On sustainable strategic framework, the implementation of RA 10931 could likewise look into the premise of the following United Nation Sustainable Development Goals, namely: SDG 3, Equal Access to Technical/ Vocational and Higher Education. This stipulates that by 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university. It is imperative to reduce barriers to skills development and technical and vocational education and training (TVET), starting from the secondary level, as well as to tertiary education, including university, and to provide lifelong learning opportunities for youth and adults. The provision of tertiary education should be made progressively free, in line with existing international agreements.

The other is SDG 4, Relevant Skills for Decent Work. This goal envisions that by 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship. This would mean having equitable access to TVET needs to be expanded while quality is ensured. Learning opportunities should be increased and diversified, using a wide range of education and training modalities. Also, acquiring set of skills that is beyond work-specific skills, emphasis must be placed on developing high-level cognitive and non-cognitive/transferable skills, such as problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, teamwork, communication skills and conflict resolution.

Next is SDG 5, Gender Equality and Inclusion. It states that by 2030, the goal us to eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations. This means inclusion and equity where all people, irrespective of sex, age, race, colour, ethnicity, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property or birth, as well as persons with disabilities, migrants, indigenous peoples, and children and youth, especially those in vulnerable situations or other status, should have access to inclusive, equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities. Gender equality where all girls and

boys, women and men, should have equal opportunity to enjoy education of high quality, achieve at equal levels and enjoy equal benefits from education. Adolescent girls and young women, who may be subject to gender-based violence, child marriage, early pregnancy and a heavy load of household chores, as well as those living in poor and remote rural areas, require special attention. In contexts in which boys are disadvantaged, targeted action should be taken for them. Policies aimed at overcoming gender inequality are more effective when they are part of an overall package that also promotes health, justice, good governance and freedom from child labor.

Another relevant goal is SDG 6, Universal Youth Literacy. By 2030 the global community ensures that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy. This means having a collective action for this target aims at ensuring that by 2030, all young people and adults across the world should have achieved relevant and recognized proficiency levels in functional literacy and numeracy skills that are equivalent to levels achieved at successful completion of basic education.

Lastly, SDG 7, Education for Sustainable Development and Global citizenship. This looks into the opportunity that by 2030, all learners could acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development. This means having the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes required by citizens to lead productive lives, make informed decisions and assume active roles locally and globally in facing and resolving global challenges can be acquired through education for sustainable development and global citizenship education, which includes peace and human rights education, as well as intercultural education and education for international understanding.

Equations

Mean Distribution - Variance Sampling. This method was used to gather the mean of the sampling population which has a mean μ , then the mean of the sampling distribution of the mean is also μ . The symbol μ_M is used to refer to the mean of the sampling distribution of the mean. Therefore, the formula for the mean of the sampling distribution of the mean can be written as:

$$\mu_M = \mu$$

I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research aims to provide an expository discussion on the implementation of the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education ACT (RA 10931), with the objective of offering an evidence based recommendations towards achieving sustainability in the implementation of such in state universities and colleges (SUCs) in Region III. Therefore, this baseline study endeavors to gather the needed data using the case study research design, with data collection tools such as survey questionnaire, document review, thematic analysis and process observation.

The paper is a descriptive quantitative qualitative study. A descriptive research design can use a wide variety of research methods to investigate one or more variables (May 15, 2019). More specifically, it helps answer the what, when, where, and how questions regarding the research problem, rather than the why (Sep 29, 2021). The quantitative part will be used for the problem one using a four-point Likert Scale to know level of implementation of these concerned SUCs of RA10931 in their respective campuses. As such, this dissertation adapted a mixed-method approach where descriptive quantitative and qualitative techniques come into play. Descriptive research designs are used in investigations when the researcher is interested in characterizing an instance, circumstance, or occurrence. It is a theory-based design, thus rather than focusing on the why, it is interested in addressing the how, what, when, and where. Before examining the underlying causes of the study problem, descriptive research instructs the researcher to first comprehend it (Bouchrika, 2019).

On the other hand, qualitative approach is used for problem two to five, to "seeks an in-depth understanding of social phenomena within their natural setting" (University of Utah College of Nursing, (n.d.). The research used semi-structured interview to allow participants to answer the questions in detail. Participants also have an idea about the study questionnaire in advance and will be mostly focusing on their experience.

3.1 Population and Sample

This study will involve selected SUCs in Region III in the Philippines. The entire population will be included for a realistic and holistic grasp of the situation surrounding the implementation of RA 10931. Target participants are top level management (vice presidents, Registrar or the UniFAST focal person, Head of Scholarship, or assigned representatives). They shall serve as the study's main source of data since they may be more knowledgeable with the concepts included in the objectives of the study. For this particular study, the proponent chose two comprehensive SUCs and technical SUCs, specifically: Tarlac State University (TSU), Bataan Peninsula State University (BPSU); Ramon Magsaysay Technological University (RMTU), and Philippine State University (PhilSCA).

In all, a total of 120 individuals participated in the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the results of the analyzed data as well as the corresponding discussions and interpretations of the different variables investigated relative to the implementation of RA10931, specifically the Free Higher Education Act of 2017. The gathered data were presented in tabular and textual form with the aid of statistical treatment for analysis and interpretation.

1. Implementation of the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act (RA 10931) of select SUCs in Region III in 2021 from CHED UniFAST and 2022 from DBM GAA as to: Amount Collected, Number of Students and Cost per Head

As explored in the study, three areas are basically investigated pertinent to the implementation of the UniFAST, These are the amount collected,, number of students and cost per head. Reflected in the table shown below are the data pertaining to these

areas in the year 2021 which was under the label “CHED UniFAST”, and the same set of data was the “DBM GAA” relegated to reflect the 2022 figures.

In presenting the information, participants were assigned with markings such as “A” = Ramon Magsaysay Technological University (RMTU); “B” - Philippine State College of Aeronautics (PhilSCA); “C” – Tarlac State University (TSU) and “D” – Bataan Peninsula State University (BPSU).

The gathered information is presented below:

Table 3
No. of students in each SUCs in the Implementation of RA 10931

Source of Funds		No. of Students
AY 2021 (CHED UniFAST)	A	12,000
	B	8,516
	C	17,408
	D	2,424
Total		40,348
AY 2022 (DBM GAA)	A	10,370
	B	7,360
	C	19,868
	D	13,274
Total		50,872

1.1 Number of Students

In terms of Number of Students, for Academic Year 2021 under the CHED UniFAST, Table 1 shows that SUC C has recorded a remarkably the highest number with a total of 17,408. It was followed by SUC A with 12,000. SUC B on the other hand, has recorded the third highest with 8,516. Of the four HEI’s being surveyed, SUC D has the lowest number of students with 2,424. In all, the number of students from the four SUC’s under CHED Uni FAST 2021 has registered a total of 40,348.

Meanwhile, the number of students under the DBM GAA UniFAST, SUC C has the most in number with a total of 19,868. This was seconded by SUC D with 13,274. The third in rank was SUC A with a total of 10,370 while SUC B has the lowest in number with a total of 7,360. Summing up the number of students under the DBM GAA for 2022, it has recorded a total of 50,872.

Results revealed that there was an increase in the number of students from a total of 40,348 based from the CHED UniFAST of 2021 to a total of 50,872 as per DBM GAA of 2022. This represents 79.32 % increase in a matter of one year. Specifically, this can be traced to SUC D increase from 2,424 under CHED UniFAST 2021 to DBM GAA of 2022 with a total of 13,274. It also placed SUC D in the second rank in 2022 as compared to being in rank four the previous year. There was also an increase in SUC C of about 2,000. Despite this increase, the decline in number of students in SUC A for the implementation in two years was also recorded of about 1,700 students as well as with SUC B of about a thousand students.

This findings can be construed as evidence to the report of CHED Unifast published in Philippine News Agency webpage (2022, March 2) citing an almost 100% utilization towards the mid of 2022. Similarly, the CHED Report (2021, May 01) took pride in presenting that 27,000 students have benefitted from the RA 10931, citing increase in the number of students which benefitted from the law. The increase being reported was basically attributed to increase in the enrolment and increase in the number of schools who are availing of the law. It was cited that there were still some schools that have yet to complete with the documentary requirements for eligibility in the said law.

1.2 Cost per Head

Table 4
Cost per head in each SUCs in the Implementation of RA 10931

Source of Funds		Cost per Head
AY 2021 (CHED UniFAST)	A	11,259.01
	B	8,000.00
	C	6,406.77
	D	9,385.00
Total		8,380.95 (Ave.)
AY 2022 (DBM GAA)	A	13,500.00
	B	8,000.00
	C	5,947.80
	D	8,317.00
Total		8,941.20 (Ave.)

The UniFAST provision sets its computation of per head allocation relative to the school's existing provisions of expenses. Basically, each school has its own computation, which was lawfully approved. Pertinent to this, the following information was determined:

As per CHED UniFAST 2021, SUC A has the highest per head cost amounting to 11,259.01. This was followed by SUC D with a per head cost of 9,385.00. SUC B declared each per head cost at 8,000.00 ranked as the third highest and SUC C has the lowest cost of 6,406.70. This gave the figure of 8,380.95 as the average cost per head that the CEED UniFAST has allocated for each student, as per the four schools being surveyed.

On the other hand, the cost per head under the DBM GAA UniFAST 2022, SUC A topped the cost per head at 13,500.00. This was seconded by SUC D at 8,317.00 per head. Meanwhile, SUC B has its per head cost at 8,000.00 while SUC C has its cost at 5,947.80 per head, the lowest rate among the four SUC's. On the average, DBM GAA has spent an average of 8,941.20 per student referring to four schools in this survey.

Of these data, differences were identified as either an increase or decrease in cost. For instance, SUC A has an increase of about 1,200.00 comparing 2021 and 2022. Hence, SUC D registered a decrease in its cost of about 1,000.00 and SUC C has reduced its cost of about 500.00. SUC B retained its cost per head on both years.

Results revealed that SUC A has retained its being on the top rank when it comes to cost with corresponding increase. SUC C and D on the other hand, has reduced their fees and SUC B remained with the same cost per head.

Cost of education is relative to each school's declared amount. In a recent survey conducted by Belmonte et al., (2022), students' choice of their school in college is primarily dependent on how much is the tuition and fee, or the cost of the course. Of the 518 students studying in SUC, about 32 percent opted for the cost, resulting to be the highest preference given the following choices such as tuition fee, distance or location, employability, academic reputation, recommended by friends and peers, recommended by family or relatives, and the availability to transfer. Also, the gathered information showed that in SUC's, the cost per head is somehow cheaper as compared to counterpart private HEI's.

1.3 Amount Collected

Table 5
Amount Collected in each SUCs in the Implementation of RA 10931

Source of Funds		Amount Collected
AY 2021 (CHED UniFAST)	A	135,108,120.00
	B	68,128,000.00
	C	111,529,052.16
	D	22,749,240.00
	Total	337,514,412.16
AY 2022 (DBM GAA)	A	139,995,000.00
	B	58,880,000.00
	C	118,170,890.40
	D	110,399,858.00
	Total	287,590,470.40

In terms of amount collected, for the AY 2021 under CHED UniFAST, SUC A topped the bill at 135,108,120.00. This was followed by SUC C at 111,529,052.16. SUC D was third in rank with an amount of 22,749,240.00. The total amount collected of these four SUCs is 337,514,412.16.

During the AY 2022, under the DBM GAA, SUC A has the highest collected amount of 139,995,000.00. This was followed by SUC C was 118,170,890.40. third in rank was SUC D with a total collected amount of 110,399,858.00. Last in rank was SUC B with a total collected amount of 58,880,000.00. The sum total of amount collected of these four schools was 287,590,470.40.

Results revealed varying differences referring to the amount collected of the four SUC's. SUC A topped the collection in both years with an increase of about five million in total collection comparing the 2021 and 2022 periods. Similarly, SUC C also registered an increase in the total amount collected of about seven (7) million. Also, SUC D has registered an increase of 78 million comparing to two academic years. On the other hand, SUC B has recorded a decrease in its total collection of about two (2) million.

The varying conditions to be considered in the discrepancy can be traced either to number of students and cost per head. To note, SUC A's increased in its collected amount was based to increase in its increase in cost per head despite of the decrease in its number of students. SUC B on the other hand, has a decrease in its total amount collected which was attributed to decrease in its number of students. SUC C has increased in its total amount collected attributed to increase in number of students albeit, decrease in its cost per head. Lastly, SUC D has remarkable increase in its total amount collected, which, was attributed to increase in its number of students despite reduction in its cost per head.

The noticeable discrepancy as to the variable cost per head has reference as well on No Tuition Fee Increase order to all SUCs and LUCs in 2017 before RA10931 was implemented. In a statement by the then CHED Executive Director, she reminded all SUCs and LUCs not to raise tuition and other fees as provided for in the transitory provisions of RA 1093. She also said tuition and other fees from the first semester of school year (SY) 2017-2018 will be maintained in the meantime.

She further emphasized that during the 5-year period of review, the government hopes to determine a standard amount that will replace tuition and other school fees in order to "establish a more equitable allocation of resources" for schools and students. The understanding is that the standards will now be similar and the same all throughout, guided by CHED policy standards.

Overall, the findings have registered a 100% indicator, meaning that, all the students were allotted, and funds disbursed vis-à-vis with cost per head, covering both years.

Moreover, to better understand the UniFAST, the process to be followed shall be in accordance with the established guidelines thereof as follows:

Through CHED - UniFAST

Upon enrollment of the qualified students, the SUC through Registrar's Office and Collecting Office of each campus / institute / college will prepare the Billing Form as prescribed by the CHED UniFAST. This report will be consolidated by the main campus for submission to CHED UniFAST. The SUC will also generate / scan the Certificate of Enrollment / Registration and will submit to the CHED UniFAST.

Upon submission of the needed documents and data, the CHED UniFAST will evaluate the content and correctness of the entries.

After determining the correctness and legality of the billing, the CHED UniFAST proceeds for further evaluation and processing of payment.

After the clearing, the CHED Central Office through AFMS will download the payment for Free Higher Education to the Authorized Government Depositing Bank through ADA.

Through DBM

Upon enrollment of the qualified students, the SUC through Registrar's Office and Collecting Office of each campus / institute / college will prepare the Billing Form. This report will be consolidated by the main campus for submission.

The Registrar's Office will submit the signed copy of the Billing to the Budget Office.

The Budget Office will prepare documents such as Budget Execution Documents (1-3), Budget Proposal (BP Form 202) – Proposed New and Expanded Programs, Justification and Project Profile, and Program of Receipts and Expenditures.

Upon signing of above-mentioned documents, the Budget Office will submit the requirements to the Office of the President and University / College / Board Secretary for recommendation of the Administrative Council and endorsement to the Board of Trustees.

The Program of Receipts and Expenditures for Free Higher Education is required based on the Special Provision for State Universities and Colleges on the GAA before releasing of payment.

The SUC through the Budget Office will submit the documents together with the required attachments and Special Budget Request to the DBM Regional Office for evaluation.

The DBM Regional Office will transmit the evaluated billing of FHE to the DBM Central Office for approval.

Once approved, the DBM will issue and release Special Allotment Release Order (SARO) and Advice of Notice of Cash Allocation Issued (ANCAI) to the Modified Disbursement Scheme (MDS) account of the SUC.

Moving forward, supplementary to these findings, the question of how these collected amounts were spent and for what purpose, data below were determined in terms of Student Benefits, Technical Processes, and Delivery of Services. In interpreting these results, the index of limit such as Always Implemented; Often Implemented; Sometimes Implemented; Rarely Implemented and Never Implemented. These limits set the level of implementation of RA10931 from the perspective of the program implementers.

Results are presented below:

Student Benefits

Table 6
Level of Implementation of RA 10931 in terms of Student Benefits

Criteria	Student Benefits				Mean	Verbal Description
	A	B	C	D		
Admission fees	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	Always Implemented
Athletic fees	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	Always Implemented
Computer fees	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	Always Implemented
Cultural fees	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	Always Implemented
Laboratory fees	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	Always Implemented
Library fees	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	Always Implemented
Registration fees	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	Always Implemented
School ID fees	5.00	5.00	4.00	5.00	4.75	Always Implemented
Graduation fees (Certificate, Diploma, TOR)	5.00	4.50	4.00	5.00	4.63	Always Implemented
Development fees	5.00	3.00	5.00	5.00	4.50	Always Implemented
Entrance fees	5.00	3.00	5.00	5.00	4.50	Always Implemented
Guidance fees	5.00	3.00	5.00	5.00	4.50	Always Implemented
Handbook fees	5.00	3.00	5.00	5.00	4.50	Always Implemented
Medical / Dental fees	5.00	1.00	5.00	5.00	4.00	Often Implemented
*Thesis fees	1.00	2.50	5.00	4.67	3.29	Sometimes Implemented
*OJT fees	1.00	1.00	5.00	5.00	3.00	Sometimes Implemented
*Others	1.00	1.00	5.00	4.67	2.92	Sometimes Implemented
Overall Mean	4.29	3.65	4.88	4.96	4.45	Often Implemented

As shown in Table 3. the Level of Implementation of RA 10931 in terms of Student Benefits has gained an overall weighted mean of 4.45 which is verbally described as Often Implemented. Specifically, Items such as Admission fees, Athletic fees, Computer fees; Cultural fees; Laboratory fees; Library fees; Registration fees got the highest rating with a “mean of 5.00 which is verbally described as Always Implemented. Second in rating is Item “School ID fees” with a mean of 4.75 and verbally interpreted as Always Implemented. Hence, there were three items that were rated Sometimes Implemented, which is considerably the lowest among all the items in terms of student benefits. These items were “Thesis fees, OJT fees and Others “with a mean of 3.29, 3.00 and 2.92 respectively.

Results revealed that the implementation of RA 10931 in terms of student benefits has considerably attained almost perfectly by the participating schools. Majority of the items included in the benefits were covered and implemented.

On the other hand, the least rated items such as Thesis and OJT fee was justifiable due to the fact that such items are not covered in the list of benefits, as stipulated in the Implementing Rules and Regulations of RA10931. Perhaps, this is one area that needs to be considered in terms of reviewing the law. In reality, students also spend money when it comes to thesis and OJT. Practices in colleges and universities normally charge thesis fee intended for honorarium and stipend of thesis adviser and panel members. Not to mention the printing and binding costs of the manuscripts.

The varying practices and policies of SUCs and LUCs also need to consider to further harness the implementation of this free tuition law. If there is no common set or standardized norm in determining the cost per head, or cost of items, this could lead to inequality of budget allocation, which defeat the meaning of universality of the provisions of this law. This contention can be associated with the study of Lomer & Lim (2022) who did a comprehensive review and analysis of laws and policies governing h access to higher education in the Philippines, These authors found a startling degree of agreement about the representation of access to higher education as a social justice problem, while ideas of procedural fairness differed. In order to promote "inclusive growth" for national development, which takes the private sector into consideration, economic justifications collided with justice narratives, framing universal tuition as guaranteeing equitable access vis-à-vis income of students' family. For other liberal democracies where the question of "who pays" for higher education continues to be contentious, the Philippines provides an illuminating example. Accordingly, lawmakers were able to reach an agreement by arguing that marketized, neo-liberal models of higher education are consistent with social justice. Thus, equity, universality and justice still remain as gray areas when it comes to establishing practices in allotting specific distribution of the resources taken from the coffers of UniFAST.

Indeed, the SUCs are bound to enhance and enrich their own mechanisms and processes referring to implementing the law in ensuring the students benefits are religiously provided. Moreso, the synergy and constant collaboration among these SUCs would result to optimum actualization of provisions set forth in the free tuition act. The best practice of one institution can be the excellent norms of all the schools. Efficiency and equitability (Tullao & Ruiz, 2022) is a necessary intervening process and means in implementing the RA 10931.

Technical Support and Processes

The RA 10931 also requires the technical Support and Processes in its implementation. The responses of four schools are presented below:

Table 7
Mean Distribution of Technical Support and Processes

Criteria	A	B	C	D	Mean	Verbal Description
Screening of students for admission (incoming 1st year)	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	Always Implemented
Enrollment procedures for all year level	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	Always Implemented
Preparation of the FHE Billing for CHED and DBM	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	Always Implemented
Proper documentation of students' record for: 2nd yr, 3rd yr, 4th yr students to make sure that they have maintained good academic standing having no subjects failed – 2UDs and 2Fs or total of 4 failing subjects	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	Always Implemented
Downloading for approved and released budget for AY 2021 (CHED UniFAST) and AY 2022 (DBM GAA)	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	Always Implemented
Continuous monitoring of students' records e.g. grades, dropouts, etc.	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	Always Implemented
Internal policies i.e. student retention, academic standing, sports and cultural activities of students	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	Always Implemented
On time submission of FHE recipients to CHED and DBM	5.00	4.50	5.00	4.67	4.79	Always Implemented
Conduct of FHE orientation to students from all year level	4.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	4.75	Always Implemented

On time submission of students' grades from departments and colleges	4.00	4.50	5.00	4.67	4.54	Always Implemented
On time submission of FHE recipients to BOR/BOT for presentation and approval	5.00	3.00	5.00	3.67	4.17	Sometimes Implemented
Overall Mean	4.82	4.73	5.00	4.82	4.84	Always Implemented

As shown in Table 4, the Implementation of RA 10931 in terms of technical support and processes gained and overall weighted mean of 4,84 which was verbally described as Always Implemented. Specifically, the following items gained the highest rating with a mean of 5.00 respective, described as Always implemented, such as "Screening of students for admission (incoming 1st year); Enrollment procedures for all year level; Preparation of the FHE Billing for CHED and DBM; Proper documentation of students' record for: 2nd yr, 3rd yr, 4th yr students to make sure that they have maintained good academic standing having no subjects failed – 2UDs and 2Fs or total of 4 failing subjects; Downloading for approved and released budget for AY 2021 (CHED UniFAST) and AY 2022 (DBM GAA); Continuous monitoring of students' records e.g. grades, dropouts, etc., and; Internal policies i.e. student retention, academic standing, sports and cultural activities of students." Meanwhile, these items was followed by item "On time submission of FHE recipients to CHED and DBM" with a mean of 4,79 and was verbally described as Always Implemented. On the other hand, the item "On time submission of FHE recipients to BOR/BOT for presentation and approval"

Results revealed that almost all of the indicators of technical support and processes were considered being implemented all the time. Hence, one item which is "On time submission of FHE recipients to BOR/BOT for presentation and approval" was noticeably rated the lowest by the respondents. This meant that the process and technical support experiences some delays pertinent to transactions with schools' BOT or BOR. Perhaps, the very reason for this is the timing and scheduling of BOT and BOR meeting of schools. As normal practice, BOT or BOR meetings only happens once every quarter. For this reason, the low rated level of implementation is understandable. However, with respect to respondents' perspectives, this item can be reconsidered for recalibration. Radically, it can be viewed as a form of top-down bureaucracy, where implementers of programs would wait and becomes dependent on the highest authorities' timing and scheduling. This finding was in fact related to an early assessment of the UniFAST process conducted by Ortiz et al., (2019) where they highly recommended "greater stability in implementing guidelines to avoid unnecessary delays in payments."

Efficient implementation of technical support and processes would result to positive outcome among the law's beneficiaries such as the students. Purigay (2020) found that the TES program, which is one of the components of UniFAST, has a favorable impact on students' determination to complete their college degrees. Also, it aids in keeping kids engaged and concentrated throughout class and on other school-related activities that improve their academic achievement. The sum of money that the TES gave the students also allows them to fund their educational expenses and lessen their financial strain while attending school.

Thus, the delay in support and process is tantamount to delaying the positive impact of this law to its beneficiaries. Perhaps, this finding augments the call to revamp what has been practiced in public administration and governance which are non-progressive and inefficient. From the point of view of being an administrator of a state college, one has to take bold steps to challenge the process, and even to challenge the accountable of these processes, even if at times, it poses the risk of being outcasted.

Delivery of Services

The RA 10931 also includes the Delivery Services in its implementation. The responses of four schools are presented below:

Table 8
Mean Distribution of Delivery Services
Delivery of Services

Criteria	A	B	C	D	Mean	Verbal Description
Providing access to education quality higher education	5	5	5	5	5.00	Always Implemented
Strengthening and institutionalizing academic procedures	5	5	5	5	5.00	Always Implemented
Observing other relevant government regulations	5	5	5	5	5.00	Always Implemented
Improving administrative and academic partnership	5	5	5	5	5.00	Always Implemented
Delivery of quality services to key stakeholders e.g. students, parents, industry and community partners	5	5	5	4.67	4.92	Always Implemented
Strengthening linkages and partnerships	5	5	5	4.67	4.92	Always Implemented
Strengthening research, innovation and publication	5	5	5	4.67	4.92	Always Implemented
Strategizing operational processes to adjust to the requirements of RA10931	5	5	5	4.67	4.92	Always Implemented
Practicing zero based financial management	5	5	5	4.67	4.92	Always Implemented
Maximizing internal available resources	5	5	5	4.67	4.92	Always Implemented

Sourcing for external funding / grants	5	5	5	4	4.75	Always Implemented
Revitalizing Income Generating Activities (IGP)	4	3	4	4.67	3.92	Often Implemented
Overall Mean	4.92	4.83	4.92	4.72	4.85	Always Implemented

As shown in Table 5, the Implementation of RA 10931 in terms of Delivery of Services has an Overall Mean of 4.85 which verbally described as Always Implemented. Specifically, Items “ Providing access to education quality higher education; Strengthening and institutionalizing academic procedures, and; Observing other relevant government regulations; Improving administrative and academic partnership” got the highest rating with a mean of 5,00 which is verbally described as Always Implemented. These were followed by Items “Delivery of quality services to key stakeholders e. g. students, parents, industry and community partners; Strengthening linkages and partnerships; Strengthening research, innovation and publication; Strategizing operational processes to adjust to the requirements of RA10931; Practicing zero based financial management, and; Maximizing internal available resources” with a mean of 4.92 which was verbally described as Always Implemented. On the other hand, Item “Revitalizing Income Generating Activities (IGP)” got the lowest rating with a mean of 3,92 verbally described as Often Implemented.

Results revealed that almost all of the items were rated as Always Implemented, The only item that was rated differently as Often Implemented was Revitalizing Income Generating Activities (IGP).

The IGP has been part of higher educational institution even prior to the implementation of UniFAST. Miranda et al., (2016) reported that the success of IGP was supportive of stabilizing the school’s resources and funds. The length of its operation, the number of staff, among others were not found significantly correlated with the success of implementation. Hence, it was the number of clients that was found important for achieving the targets of the IGP.

Given that, with the onset of UniFAST, school’s IGP was shaken up, as some items and products used to be a source of income prior to RA 10931, were covered in the said law like ID’s uniforms, etc. This was complimented by the mindset that college education is already free, income generating project became an unwelcome thought in the academic environment, especially among the students, who are basically the clients of the IGP. Thus, SUC’s refrained, least, take minimal initiatives as per IGP.

Perhaps, the findings would be another call for authorities to revisit and rethink the provisions of the RA 90131 pertinent to IGP programs of SUC’s. To date, there is not much established scholarly works that embark on the impact of RA 90131 in the IGP schemes of SUC’s. In effect, the SUC’s became mere dependents on the allocations of the government in operating the schools. Other possible endeavors were out on hold which are not part of the provision of the law. SUC’s can freely craft more progressive and developmental initiatives if there is more than enough budget at hand. IGP in fact, was a source of such supplemental projects which will give additional benefits to the students, in capacitating the employees and improving the facility of schools.

The above contention can be associated with what Blas (2018) has reported in his research which the purpose is to evaluate the revenue-generating initiatives of Bulacan Agricultural State College for the academic year 2018–2019. Purposive sampling and the descriptive research approach were used to identify respondents (faculty and project leaders or administrator(s) were employed. The purpose of the research was to assess the IGP’s productivity and goal-achievement levels as evaluated by the Faculty and project-in-charge/administrators; faculty perception of the administration’s level of support for the IGP and the project-in-charge/administrators; as well as the difficulties the Bulacan Agricultural State College has faced in running its operations. The BASC IGP. Hence, the research came to the conclusion that BASC IGP had been giving the College financial support. Moreover, the ongoing occurrence of the highlighted issues throughout IGP operation, if not adequately handled, would undoubtedly have a negative impact on the BASC’s IGP’s productivity, notably in terms of producing financial output, employment, and student scholarship grants, to mention a few. As a result, the BASC would continue to lack financial independence. Due to the IGP’s of BASC’s lack of productivity, which must be improved in order to make up for the annual, insufficient school budget provided by the national government, the College’s ability to provide high-quality education would thus stay unaltered or be negatively impacted.

2. Challenges and Issues Encountered by SUC in the Implementation of RA 10931 specifically the Free Higher Education Act of 2017

The indicators below concerning the challenges encountered by SUC were pre-determined. Items from previous section which were not rated as “Always Implemented” were identified and grouped accordingly. into a checklist assessment tool. The purpose was to re-validate these items by letting the participants to further assess the said indicators from the perspective of being hindrances and challenges in the implementation.

Participants were asked to identify which of the pre-determined items was considered as challenging.

Results are presented below:

Table 9
Challenges and Issues Encountered by SUCs in the Implementation of RA 10931

Situations	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Technical Support and Processes</i>		
On-time submission of FHE recipients to CHED and DBM	15	50%
On-time submission of FHE recipients to BOR/BOT for presentation and approval	15	50%
On-time submission of students’ grades from departments and colleges	15	50%
Conduct of FHE orientation to students from all year level	15	50%
<i>Delivery of Services</i>		

Revitalizing Income Generating Activities (IGP)	23	75%
Delivery of quality services to key stakeholders e.g. students, parents, industry and community partners	15	50%
Strengthening linkages and partnerships	15	50%
Strengthening research, innovation and publication	15	50%
Sourcing for external funding / grants	15	50%
Strategizing operational processes to adjust to the requirements of RA10931	15	50%
Practicing zero based financial management	15	50%
Maximizing internal available resources	15	50%

As shown in Table 6, there were four items indicating the challenges and issues as per the technical support and processes. These were “On-time submission of FHE recipients to CHED and DBM; On-time submission of FHE recipients to BOR/BOT for presentation and approval; On-time submission of students’ grades from departments and colleges, and; Conduct of FHE orientation to students from all year level.” Fifteen of the thirty participants or 50% were found to have picked each item, as their challenge and issue.

The numerical rating meant an equal footing as per the choice of the respondents leading to construe an even level of disparity in opinion. Specifically, while two of the four pointed out an item, the other two opted otherwise. With this differing notion, the challenges and issues in SUC is basically subjective and relative to each of the school. However, whatever may be the case, the governing agency, like CHED and DBM have to have intervening measures to address the challenges. Hence, the nature of the challenges and issues being cited herein, were in fact very administrative and pertinent to the internal processes that behoove the SUCs, of which, each issue is a concern of a specific department and not only relegated to one group. In such a case, synergy and collaboration might as well an immediate recourse to adapt.. For instance, the on-time submission of list of recipients is basically the responsibility of the Office of the Student Affairs together with the conduct of orientation of FHE to all year levels, On the other hand, the on-time submission of grades is basically a responsibility of a department or institute., an the on-time submission for approval is a concern of the Office of the President of the SUC. Salcedo, the 2nd District Congressman of Albay, was quoted in his November 21 Report to Congress saying “It’s implementation, stupid. No matter how good the law, it fails due to bad implementation” and added that “as principal author, sponsor, and advocate of universal access to quality tertiary education, this dismal turn of events deprives ordinary Filipinos of a major step to achieving their aspirations and does not bode well for the contribution of this law to nation-building and national development, particularly if the flaws in implementation are not remedied decisively and expeditiously (Cepeda, 2022).

On the other hand, in terms of challenges and concerns about the delivery services, the following items were pre-determined and was further assessed by the respondents. These were delivery of quality services to key stakeholders e.g. students, parents, industry and community partners; strengthening linkages and partnerships; Strengthening research, innovation and publication, sourcing for external funding / grants, strategizing operational processes to adjust to the requirements of RA10931, practicing zero based financial management, and; maximizing internal available resource s.” All these items were also rated with differing perspective among the respondents. Specifically, 50% of them have identified these indicators as their challenges and issues, to which, the other 50% did not.” On the other hand, majority of the respondents identified the item “Revitalizing Income Generating Activities (IGP)” as a challenge and issue in the implementation of the RA 10931. Being the only item assessed by the majority of respondents., denotes the gravity of the statement as a compelling issue of the SUCs.

Prior to the implementation of the RA 10931, IGP used to be a preferred source of augmenting the budget and resources of SUCs. Having additional funds generated by schools, more activities were being pursued and implemented, all for the advancement of the school and its members, the faculty, the non-teaching and the students. Manansan & Revilla (2015), in a discussion paper published by Philippine Development Studies emphasized that state universities and colleges (SUCs) have the ability to corporatize and control their own finances attributed to the stipulation in the "Higher Education Modernization Act of 1997," and in the CHED Memorandum Order No. 20, and "Public Higher Education Reform Framework." With these laws and regulations, the authors evaluated how well SUCs generate and utilize finances thru IGP. The purpose of this study was to assess the various internally generated incomes (IGI) sources used by SUCs and to examine how these earnings are distributed and utilized. Moreover, it assessed the proportions of domestically produced revenue and national government (NG) subsidies in terms of collection and utilization. The paper provided measures on how to enhance the fund generation that SUCs earn internally and make sure that they utilize it to support their teaching, research, and outreach efforts, in addition to the regular national government subsidy that SUCs gets from the national government.

In a more specific juncture, it is worth citing from the paper presentation the very thoughts of the participants reported as :

“The majority of the SUCs officials who attended the FGDs conducted for this study point out that SUCs use their internally generated income that are lodged in their STFs/ RFs for the salaries of part-time and contractual faculty and lecturers because the PS budget from GAA is not enough to cover all their PS requirements. However, the use of the SUCs’ internally generated income for PS appears to be stymied by inconsistency between the provisions of COA Circular No. 2000-002 and that of the GAA for various years with regards to the use of SUCs IGI for PS, thereby resulting in some unevenness in the way COA auditors treat SUCs in this respect. This may also explain why the allocation for PS from the IGI is not larger despite some evidence of PS underfunding”

This clearly shows that the SUC were in fact made their life easier when there was IGP and with the absence of FHE. However, to date, there was no comprehensive scholarly work recognized by the government and SUC’s as baseline data for

establishing the correlates of FHE and IGP. The only convincing scenario is that internal funds generated from IGP is depleted, as uttered informally by the respondents.

The above presentation of challenges and issues was further pursued in this research by conducting KII among the key personalities from the four schools, focused on the notable practices adapted by the SUC in addressing the challenges.

3. Notable Practices and Measures that SUC Adopted in Order to Address the Challenges and Issues in the Implementation of RA 10931

Respondents were interviewed to elicit the notable practices and measures that SUCs adopted pertinent to addressing the challenges and issues. In analyzing the gathered information, themes were culled to determine the commonality in their perspectives.

Five themes have emerged from the information provided by the Key Informants, such as (1) Synergy and Collaboration among Different Units and Departments of the Institution (2) Communication Strategies; (3) Adaptive Leadership Styles; (4) Dedication of Accountable Persons and (5) Data Management.

Discussions of these themes are as follow:

Synergy and Collaboration among Different Units and Departments

Majority of the KI's pointed out the synergy and collaboration with and among the various units and departments of the institution. KI from SUC A mentioned that "the constant communication has led to a very evident synergy and collaboration. The staff of each office, or coordinators were all cooperative." This KI is the focal person of the FHE in their institution who also holds various designations in the institution. On the other hand, KI from SUC b who is a Budget Officer of the school and at the same time designated as official liason to DBM, shared that "In the school, synergy and strengthened collaboration between and among units and departments were observed, *Dahil maliit lang ang main campus kung saan naka base ang focal person ng FHE, even informal situations, follow-ups are being done* (Due to having a small compound in the main campus where the FHE focal person is based, follow - ups are done even during informal setting). " SUC B has three other satellite campuses, ne in Cebu, one in Pampanga, and one in Lipa Batangas. In the words of KI from SUC D it was expressed that "One good thing, everyone was cooperative." This KI is the school's focal person for free education and at the same time assigned n middle management position in the finance department of the school.

This theme found common among the responses was seen as vital to addressing the challenges and issues on the implementation of the free education law. Working together for a purpose presupposes success in any organization (Ajibade, & Egge, 2019). Just recently, the current DBM Secretary Pangandaman (2023) capitalized on the value of synergy within the various departments and units of a government agency, admonishing the regional directors to promote healthy work relations, coordinated systems and process, and practices supportive and complimentary to achieving the end goals of the agency. It was pointed out that such culture can pave the way for a better fiscal management of each agency.

The perspectives of the participants, looking at the picture of working together, is taken as positive impact of UniFAST in terms on internal operation of the school. Whether the school like it or not, they were compelled to enhanced the way they do things in their respective area of responsibilities that are part of the mechanisms in implementing the free education. One failure in one part would lead to failure of the whole.

Communication Strategies

Complimentary to synergy and collaboration, is the theme of communication strategies which were also found common among the responses of the KIs. For instance, KI of SUC C relayed that "the value of communicating to other stakeholders who are involved in the RA10931 implementation was also notable in the few years of implementing it. *Kaso lang, sa isang institutiosn, hindi maiiwasan ang salungat at samu;tsaring mga opinion at pananaw ng mga tao.* (However, in an institution, we cannot discount the reality of the differing opinions and perspectives of people.). That is why, I myself was challenged to take different approaches on how to communicate to different members of the school, it can be either in formal means or casual manner." Another respondent, a KI from SUC D mentioned that "crucial to cooperation is the manner of staff on how to communicate. This is very important especially when addressing the inquiries of parents, the students and even fellow employees in the school."

Since the implementation of RA 10931 entail information dissemination to all concerned, focal persons of the agencies, or anybody who is tasked to provide information in any means and platform, has to have the knowledge, skill and competency pertinent to communicating. The RA 10931 is a law that is defined specifically for a definite purpose to which its parameters and coverage infers specific denotation.. Moreover, the information about the law is embedded with disbursing money, that is a dole out to its beneficiaries, Given that, differing strategies to communicate requires preciseness of what is to communicate, so that it will not implicate the corresponding monetary equivalent that the information bring along in itself.

Adaptive Leadership Style

The leadership of the top management was another theme that was digested from the responses. Top management refers to the agency head, the officers who are next in line to the authority of the president and down to those who have managerial and supervisory functions. The KI from SUC B pointed out that : "*One thing more, masipag kasi ang aming president ng school* (One more thing, out school President is hardworking and industries.) He is constantly reminding accountable persons especially when there is a scheduled Board Meeting." This was also remarkable to note that SUC B, with three other satellite campuses, the hands-on leadership style evident in RA 10931 implementation is being practiced. Similarly, KI of SUC D , who happened to be the VPAA shared that "As VPAA, much is expected of me as a leader. When this FHE was implemented, I made sure that I do follow-ups with other departments as to the status of qualified benefits, are the requirements already prepared, etc." Meanwhile, a KI from SUC A, who is the head of the scholarship department, uttered, "*Swerte po kami at ang aming Campus Director ay palaging naka-alalay sa amin sa pagpapatupad ng free higher education* (We are lucky with our Campus Director who are always supporting us in the implementation of the free higher education)."

The adaptive leadership style was regarded as one of the notable practices essential in the implementation of the RA10931. As what the majority of the respondents have conveyed, being hands-on and keeping a close monitoring of the activities relevant to implementation, made the implementation easier and efficient. Palencia (2015), after assessing a state university in the Eastern Visayas, Philippines, concluded that , organizational culture is characterized by the leadership philosophies of executives. An

organization's culture reflects the type of leaders it has. The culture of a company is shaped by its leaders. The leader is the culture's upholder, personification, continuous incarnation, or new example of what it ought to be.

It is therefore commendable that the SUC leaders were optimistic and diligent in giving justice to the implementation of the RA 10931 despite of the challenges and issues, as well as the limitations of the said law.

Dedication of Accountable Persons

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was the dedication of accountable persons, as perceived by the KIs. For instance, a KI from SUC C, being appointed as Registrar, commended that "my staff are very religious in accomplishing their reports." A KI from SUC D, who happened to be the Accountant echoed that "Not just once, not just thrice, my staff have imbibed this attitude of diligently reviewing and checking the details of FHE reports." From the same school, KI who is the Registrar said that "We needed to increase our effort, over-time talaga ang mga tao (We needed to catch up and staff went to over-time: Meanwhile, a KI from SUC A, who is the head of the scholarship shared that "When I was assigned to head the scholarship, I felt honored. To work for the welfare of the students directly, by advocating scholarships, and of course, acting as focal person for FHE, all these made me more committed and dedicated to the job."

Results convey that the attitude, particularly the dedication and commitment of responsible persons in the implementation of the law, was noticed by the respondents as a notable practice. Nieto (2018) concluded that "the non-teaching personnel of PUP, TUP, and EARIST, assessed their organizational commitment in terms of affective, continuance and normative as "moderately agree" which means that these are fairly evident that the organization makes them feel the value of belongingness, happiness and enjoyment and they have moral obligations to perform their job."

The traits and characters of implementers of this law can be construed as very significant in the smooth actualization of free higher education as mandated.

Data Management

Another theme that was culled from the KIs responses is on data management. Majority of the respondents banked on the importance of data management as crucial component of the implementation of the law. For instance, the Registrar of SUC A shared "The registrar office plays a critical role in RA 10931, Data comes from us. Integrity is a must and am happy that we are able to sustain it even before the RA 10931. *Bawat detalye ay mahalaga* (Every detail is important). On the other hand, KI from SUC B, mentioned that "before RA10931 was reenacted, beneficiaries are required to submit the ITR of their parents, this is to separate them from those who are more capable of paying their own tuition." This meant that there was a streamlining in the requirements resulting to lesser paper works and documentation. Meanwhile, data management was one highlight from the stories of KIs from SUC D. The VPAA mentioned that "However, *nakakabigla, dahil dati ay around 2000 lang ang mga students, it jumped to around 13,000 noong 2022* (It was overwhelming, from the previous 2000 number of students, it jumped to as high as 13,000.). Well this was actually attributed to pandemic. When the school reopened, we took in about 13,000 for year 2022, leading us to a challenging task of processing and delivering this free higher education."

Results meant that while there is need to sustain the integrity of data, the need to adjust and adapt appropriate steps in managing large data is inevitable. In a report published by the Asian Development Bank in 2022 about the data management policies and practices in government admonished that effective data management is a top priority for governments as it plays a key role in unlocking the value of data. Three components were emphasized to sustain an efficient data management which are high-quality policy making, improved coordination across agencies, Powerful digital government platforms and Harmonized internal data systems.

The SUCs that participated in the study were found to be somehow aligned with these constructs, considering that each of them have found practices and intervention to mitigate the challenges and issues at hand about the free education implementation. Despite lacking in quite updated resources, like technology backed-up facility for processing the data, restoring and retrieving them. the schools were adept in keeping files intact and archivable. Despite lacking in established network that would make tasks done faster and easier, the schools bear the manual challenge of authenticating and verifying documents pertinent to required forms and attachments from the students that would merit their application.

4. Recommendations in Order to Ensure that SUCs are Moving towards Building Knowledge Economy given the Implementation of FHEA

Based from the KIs input, the following themes were identified as recommendations towards SUC's mobbing towards building knowledge economy. These are (1) strengthen values inculcation among students, (2) emphasize the role of faculty and coordinators, (3) continuous curriculum review and improvement and (4) clarify budget allocation and sourcing.

Strengthen Values Inculcation among Students

One of the recommendations found from the responses is to enhance the inculcation of values among the students who are benefiting from the free tuition. The VPAA KI from SUC B expressed that "*Tama yan, dapat masiguro ang knowledge economy and tinutungo ng edukasyon sa kolehiyo* (It is right, that HEIs are geared towards knowledge economy May I suggest that SUC's strengthen the values inculcation so that students must realize the importance of free education. In effect, they will strive to be the best they can be." This meant that knowledge economy especially intelligence capital, can be achieved by setting the right perspectives of the students who are the future capital. The right attitude of students towards education must be ensured by the school, which is tantamount to setting high quality performance. Alipio (2020). aimed to confirm the relationships between psychological variables, expectancy-value beliefs, and academic achievement. With a systematic sample of 12,452 college freshman from 70 higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Philippines, a cross-sectional survey was carried out. According to zero-order correlations, psychological elements, Academic achievement and expectancy-value views are strongly tied to one another. According to a path analysis, help-seeking, self-worth, self-efficacy, and social support all have a favorable impact on academic achievement as well as expectancy-value beliefs. The path analysis also revealed that academic overload and perceived stress had an adverse effect on expectancy-value beliefs and academic performance, but expectancy-value beliefs had an advantageous effect on academic performance. Expectancy value beliefs to OBE were shown to partially buffer the effects of the six psychological

factors, including assistance seeking, self-efficacy, self-worth, social support, perceived academic load, and on academic performance, stress. In light of the study's findings, a model that would employ psychological techniques, forecast pupils' academic achievement while using the OBE method. The development of factors and expectation-value beliefs. Though the study were more of the correlates of OBE to what the students are valuing and expectations in college, this can be taken as indirectly affecting the knowledge building in the HEI. That is, what students value will take effect on their performance.

In this regard, the SUCs have to enhance the values inculcation effecting how the students view the free tuition provided by the government. Instead of taking it as an "entitlement" the school should rather emphasize on succeeding in their education and pursuing excellence. Also, the value of gratitude has to be emphasized which can be translated to challenging the students to give back to his or her society. Thus, achieving knowledge economy is dependent on the values of students which they have while they are in the tertiary education.

Emphasize the Role of Faculty and Coordinators

Another recommendation that arises from the responses is giving emphasis on the roles of the faculty and the coordinators. KI from SUC A who happened to be the campus Director pointed that "as far as I know, no established scientific study has been published as to the relations of FHE and knowledge economy. But, it can be recommended that the faculty and program coordinators be the catalysts to form students to become globally competent equipped with knowledge and skills with focus on research and being innovative." The campus director relied heavily on the functions of the faculty and coordinators being the direct contact of students when it comes to learning process.

Perhaps, the faculty and program coordinators must embrace a mindset of achieving a knowledge economy-based culture in the organization. Edvinsson et al. (2022) who worked on an extensive review of researchers that emerged for the last two decades pointed out that the knowledge economy is a well-established idea, and a new paradigm based on an economy where value and sustainability are the fundamental principles is evolving. In order to produce value that also adopts a sustainable viewpoint, organizations are using innovative models especially in the context of formal education organization. One of which is giving value to middle managers that included the teachers, coordinators and supervisors. These functionalities play a major role in building intellectual capital since they are the bridge between the top management and the ordinary capital who the students. In some schools, younger generation were chosen to take the roles of middle management, defying seniority and years of experience. The idea was to ease up the generation gap between the senior members of the academe owing to the context of belongingness and culture identification. As observed, younger batch of coordinators and middle managers in schools can easily understand what and how do the current student generation assimilate and process knowledge.

Continuous Curriculum Review and Improvement

Another recommendation worth taking from respondents perspective is continuous review and improvement of the curriculum. A KI from SUC B shared that "as the Registrar of our institution for more than a decade, I have seen how the curriculum have changed overtime. *At napaka specific pa ng aming school which is aviation, highly technical* (Our school is very specific which is focused on aviation and I highly technical). *Alam naman natin na ang aviation industry ay mabilis mag-evolve because of the technological advancement* (We all know that aviation industry evolves rapidly) In that context, the school cannot be complacent about integrating the current knowledge advancements.) This KI further elaborated the significance of competencies vis-à-vis the industry demands for laborers. There must be an alignment along the way.

This meant that the subject offerings and the teaching strategies are all geared to attaining a sustained knowledge economy imbued and manifested in the SUC. For instance, Follett & Levine-Segev (2021) argued that employees in practically all industries today face new challenges as a result of the knowledge economy's globalization. Specifically, strong STEM, global competencies, and critical thinking abilities are required for all sectors and occupations. It was further described that companies now face a skill gap as a result of the deteriorating American educational system. Many employers conveyed that they are unable to hire workers with the knowledge-economy – based job- skill set. This skill gap is damaging to both American businesses and employees, eventually harming the American economy. Their study made use of the PISA test and other data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Using subject-specific data, it was examined how well American high school students perform in the fields of STEM, reading, worldly awareness, and critical thinking. Data revealed that American high school students do less well, as compared to their foreign colleagues, and lack the fundamental competencies required for engaging in the knowledge economy, especially in the fields of STEM, global competencies, and critical thinking. Project-Based Learning (PBL), school-business collaborations, and continuing education are examples of potential remedies, all interacted in curriculum review and improvement. Wage increases for STEM instructors, as well as cross-disciplinary education were also identified. To guarantee success in accommodating the evolving workforce of American industry, the education system will need to be improved, bringing positive result to knowledge economy that is now the global trend.

SUCs must not be contented with the status quo of the course and program offerings that they have at the moment. The return of investment of the FHE can be measured in the number of successful graduates that SUC can produce, entitled with updated degree and courses. Hence, as an observation, the process of curriculum improvement and even securing accreditation from government agencies, are at times, hinder the progressive actions of educators towards curriculum enhancement.

Clarify and Amend the Budget Allocation and Sourcing

Another recommendation that is elicited from the responses is clarifying and amending the budget allocation stipulated in the RA 10931, as well as sourcing of additional funds for the SUC. Most of the KIs had expressed this point of view. Specifically, KI from SUC B mentioned "I feel that the IRR of RA 10931 should be amended towards increase in budget allocation. Like for instance, we are in ICT era, yet we cannot have a more advanced system in enrolment." Another KI from the same SUC said that "include Thesis Fee and OJT fee in the IRR of RA 10931." This was the same clamor of a KI from SUC C.

Meanwhile, sourcing of additional budget for the SUC was also cited specifically in the Income Generating Projects, also known as IGP's. the contentions of the respondents was to revitalize the adaption and implementation of IGP's so that the SUC can create and implement more programs and activities which will have impact on knowledge economy sustainability. Virola (2019) maintained that SUCs have faced budget restrictions and difficulties upon the implementation of the free higher education in the

country. Hence, Tolbe (2020) worked on the IGP schemes of SUCs in the Philippines regarding how it is being managed and how beneficial it is to the SUCs. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to ascertain the level of practices used by the State Universities and Colleges in Region I in managing and operating their Income-Generating Projects (IGPs) and to evaluate the economic benefits derived from their IGPs in terms of employee benefits, employment creation, school facility improvement, and project expansion. In terms of organization, human resource management, financial management, marketing management, and operational guidelines and activities, it focuses on the levels of practices adopted by the SUCs in the management and operation of their IGPs. Results revealed that the SUCs in Region I adhere to the predetermined procedures for managing finances, marketing, human resources, and marketing. They also follow the established operating rules and procedures. The IGPs of the SUCs in Region I provided substantial contributions to greater employee benefits, employment creation, school facility renovation, and project growth. The IGPs' economic advantages are greatly influenced by how they are managed and run.

These recommendations on IRR review where Thesis Fee and OJT fee has to be integrated, as well as revitalizing the IGP, are seen as significant in building knowledge economy environment and culture in the SUC. The SUC can do more when they are endowed and operates based on augmented budgets and allocations.

5. The Implications of the Study to Public Administration

Based from the information generated in the study, several implications were taken anchored on the following such as Public Policy Formulation and Implementation, Social Justice and Economic Divide and SUCs as Accountable Instructions of Public Administration

On Public Policy Formulation and Implementation

Basically, the RA 10931 was an expansion of the Free Tuition 2017 which was “ a special program of the government that was inserted in the budget of the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) that made tuition fees free in State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) for Academic Year (AY) 2017-2018 (UniFAST Web Page). Miscellaneous and other school fees are not covered in Free Tuition 2017. The RA 10931 also known as Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act, covers four distinct features such as (1) Free Higher Education (tuition and miscellaneous fees) in SUCs and CHED-recognized Local Universities and Colleges;; (2) Free Technical-Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in public and private institutions registered with TESDA, (3) Tertiary Education Subsidy (TES) or grants-in-aid for poor students in public and private institutions; and (4) Student Loan Program (SLP) for tertiary education students. The CHED on the other hand, created the Unified Student Financial Assistance Systems for Tertiary Education where facilitation of the RA 10931 was undertaken but only until the year 2021, particularly on the process and delivery implementation. Comes year 2022 and beyond, the facilitation was transferred to DBM, moving forward. While it was enacted into law in 2017, the Implementing Rules and Regulations was only implemented about a year after in 2018.

The above gist led to several point of views, which can also be associated with the findings of the study. Foremost is the implementation in itself. The covered agencies such as the SUCs and other government recognized academic institutions were diligent and quick enough to roll-out the law, complemented by staff dedication, sound leadership, and integrity in serving the beneficiaries.

Given this, any law that is enacted, even if it has fallback, must be respected and carried accordingly, in reference to its essence and intention. Public Administrators must comply, and find the optimum positive effect of the law to its subjects.

However, a slight unwelcome practice in this particular law was the crafting of the law in itself. For instance, the delay in the formulation and implementation of its IRR was seen as weakness. While the SUC's were diligently enough to carry out the law, the specific guidelines have yet to be found. CHED was actually the responsible agency to create the IRR. Hence, the Senate moved for the law's implementation through House Resolution No 620, sponsored and authored by Senator Paolo Benigno Aquino IV, calling the government to start implementing RA 10931 stipulating that “by administering and affording the students free tuition and other school fees at the start of the second semester of academic year 2017-2018. (19th Congress Press Release, February 13, 2018). “ The report further conveyed that “the Senate's adoption of the resolution came after newly- appointed CHED officer-in - charge (OIC) Prospero De Vera said that CHED would aim to fully implement the provision of the free tuition and other school fees starting June 2018 for academic year 2018-2019, as the commission is still in the process of finalizing the law's implementing rules and regulations.” Would it be better if the RA 10931 comes along with an IRR? And, the non-coverage of Thesis Fee and OJT Fee was a gray area and was not fully rationalized, when the IRR was adapted.

The above scenario implies the need to enrich the crafting of the law, its implementation and the synergy or collaboration of various government agencies.

To further elucidate the implication of the study to public administration vis-à-vis public policy formulation and implementation, authorship of the law is also a concept that is to be considered. Traditional politics entails giving importance to who the author is, rather than what the law is all about. Authoring a law is an added marketability of the law maker when election comes. In the case of RA 10931, the names of Senators Ralph Recto, Bam Aquino and Chiz Escudero surfaced as responsible for making this law to happen. However, the very idea of pursuing free education was actually initiated by no other than the President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. or BBM, when he was still a senator way back in 2015. In a Press Release of the Senate of the Philippines 19th Congress dated November 14, 2015, it was reported that “Senator Ferdinand “Bongbong” R. Marcos, Jr. is pushing for free college education in all the state colleges and universities in the country.” In a news conference held at the La Carmela Hotel and Convention Center on the island of Boracay in Malay, Aklan, Marcos stated that according to his research, the government is able to pay for the tuition of all SUC students.

Through this FHE policy, the lawmakers and the executive department has to heightened collaboration in working hand in hand for the sake of the younger generation.

On Social Justice and Economic Divide

Another implication of this free education law is on the tenets of social justice and equity as well as economic divide. Lomer & Lim (2022) found that most of the scholarly works upheld that access to higher education is a social justice issue, but concepts which of procedural fairness varied. In the context of social justice, higher education is an integral part of right to education which was declared by United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Though it was not explicitly mentioned “free education”, it merits that everyone has the right to access a tertiary education.

Hence, the social injustice lies in the subjectivity of the law where free education is only being offered in SUC, which can be construed as being selective in nature. While this maybe acceptable as a form of helping the poor but deserving students, in reality, not all students in SUCs are considerably poor. In a sense, there is already a presumptive social injustice present in the scenario.

On the other hand, the law can be construed as enforcer of social economic divide, since it delimits the access to poor but not to the rich. Is economic stature defines the right to education? the right to free education as mandated by the RA 10931.

Moreover, the source of fund of the law comes from the income tax of the people. Statistics would tell us that 80% of taxpayers in the country are those who are employed and wage earners. The remaining 20% are the individuals who earn through business or through practice of profession. In this context, the economic divide is very clear, where the middle income earners down to low income earners shoulder the cost of free education.

Thus, public administration, particularly the lawmaking body and the executive department has to reconsider this social justice and equity, as factors implicated in the promulgation of this law.

Accountable Instructions of Public Administration

The SUCs as venue of free higher education emancipates an accountability to modelling a public administration exemplars. This study which embark not only on the implementation of the RA 10931, but also included the challenges, and the notable practices in addressing these challenges. as well as exploring the SUCs strategic direction of building knowledge economy, in effect, has implied witnessing the ideals of public administration. From the top management down to ordinary staff of each institution, all where called as public administrators. Positively, findings of the study yielded promising stories of how the SUCs have managed implementing the law. despite of the fallbacks. The dedication and commitment of the focal persons and involved personnel, the hands-on adaptive leadership styles, and the desire to establish a knowledge economy. are considerably evidence of public administration.

However, the study would like to emphasize the values-based embodiment of being public administrators among the members of the SUC. Moreso, values-based culture must be inculcated among the students who are the intellectual capitals of the knowledge economy to which, the 21st century global economic and labor market has been dwelt into

Lastly, this accountability of the SUCs as public administration advocates must also capitalize on creating a culture where the students would imbibe the value of returning the investment to the Philippine society – a very gray and decaying parlance in today's generation. Nationalism and patriotism among the beneficiaries are becoming an obsolete choice.

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