

Bibingka leadership: Dr. Neil Martial R. Santillan

Barely a week in office, Dr. Neil Martial R. Santillan, the new Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs (VCSA), already hit the ground running and delivered his first speech—the welcome remarks at the opening of the Freshman Orientation Program (FOP) on May 6.

His appointment took effect on May 1 and was affirmed by Chancellor Michael L. Tan on May 2.

Among his first initiatives were new inputs to the FOP. For the first time, the OVCSA organized the program in partnership with the University Student Council (USC) and local college councils; the UP Rayadillo joined the FOP to open and close the program; and parents and students were asked to submit a written evaluation at the end of the FOP.

Bibingka leadership. Being at the helm of the OVCSA, he plans to hold constant dialogues and consultations with the students to involve them in decision-making.

In an interview with UPDate, Santillan said “Bibingka leadership” will be his strategy in handling his job as vice chancellor.

“Ang Bibingka ay isang kakaning niluluto sa ilalim at niluluto rin sa itaas. Bilang paghahalintulad ng nabanggit na kakanin sa isang uri ng liderato, taglay nito ang kaparaanan na makipag-ugnayan sa itaas na nagbaba ng mga patakaran at ang kakayahang makinig sa ibaba na nagsusulong ng mga prosesong demokratiko. In UP, there should be a meeting of minds to strike a balance between top down and bottom up approaches of leadership,” he explained.

Moreover, he said “Mahirap ang posisyon ng isang opisyal ng Diliman dahil kinakailangan mong maglingkod na tagapamagitan ng pamunuan ng UP System at ng mga pinaglilingkuran mo sa sarili mong kampus. Kailangang mong gumitna sa pamamagitan ng pakikitungo sa itaas na tagagawa ng mga patakaran at pakikinig sa ibaba na tagatanggap ng mga ito. Sa salimbayang ito, kinakailangan palaging isinasapuso na palaging itaguyod ang kapakanan at kagalingan ng mga estudyante.”

Top three priorities: Santillan said that he has yet to conduct a strategic planning workshop with the OVCSA staff but he already knows the top three priorities for the office. These are to: 1) codify existing student policies and guidelines, 2) find ways to effectively disseminate information, and 3) optimize student services by providing new interventions.

First, he said there is a need to codify student policies and guidelines. “Sa aking pagtatasa, malaking suliranin ang kakulangan ng kaalaman ng mga estudyante kung ano ang iba’t ibang panuntunan na nagsusulong ng kanilang kapakanan. Thus, we have to facilitate the collation of all pertinent information vital to student services.”

He plans to revive the student guide created during the term of Prof. Barbara Wong-Fernandez from 1996 to 1999 while waiting for the approval of the UPD Student Code of Conduct by the Board of Regents.

In addition to existing student policies of the University, Santillan plans to include Philippine laws that are pertinent to rights and welfare of students.

Second, he said there is a need to find ways on how to effectively disseminate information. “We need to explore, aside from the usual memos and Facebook, other ways that we can maximize the visibility of the OVCSA and its line offices. With information, we would be able to access lots of students and we can get potential donors to support [our] program like the Adopt-a-Student,” he said.

Third, Santillan said it is necessary to optimize student services “by creating or by providing new interventions.”

“Noong Abril 2014, hinirang ako ni Tsanselor Tan bilang PDA (program development associate) para sa usaping mag-aaral. Sa panahong ito, lumahok ako sa isang pulong na pinatawag ni Tsanselor Tan kasama ang mga lider-estudyante ng iba’t ibang dormitoryo. Sa daloy ng usapan, napansin ko, na bagamat mas maayos ang mga dorm ngayon kumpara noong panahon namin, patuloy pa ring nasasadlak sa parehong mga isyu ang mga dorm ng UP tulad ng kakulangan ng pondo sa pagpapaayos ng mga ito,” he said.

For nearly six years, Santillan used to be a resident at the Narra Residence Hall and the Ipil Residence Hall. He also stayed in different boarding houses within UP when he was a student. “Ang pinakamalaking problema ay ang kakulangan ng amenities sa ating mga dormitoryo—walang function rooms, walang study centers,” he said.

Morover, he said “There is a need to make a modernization plan for UP Diliman residence halls that highlights building development and enhanced student services such as the creation of dorm-based study centers that will be handled by the house councils in cooperation with the Diliman Learning Resource Center (DLRC). He also plans to establish a dorm support fund- an intervention to engage dorm alumni to support their respective dorms or invite partners to give cash or donations in kind for the improvement of UP dormitories.”

In addition, Santillan plans a university-wide implementation of the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy (CSSP) initiative wherein the College organizes an open house for the UP College Admission Test (UPCAT) passers who have chosen courses under CSSP or who have yet to decide which course to take. He explained that the College coordinates with the Office of the University Registrar to invite students to attend the CSSP’s open house.

An associate dean. The job is something very familiar to the young and dynamic vice chancellor since he served as the Associate Dean for Administration, Student Affairs and Extension at the CSSP from August 2010 to April 2014.

As an associate dean, Santillan said he dealt with student concerns, staff development, facilities and security concerns as well as conducting training for social science teachers.

He mentioned that one of the most important things he accomplished during his term was to establish a good partnership with the CSSP Student Council and various student organizations.

“Maraming proyekto sa CSSP ang produkto ng pagtutulungan ng aming pamunuan at ng sangguniang mag-aaral ng kolehiyo. Bilang isang halimbawa, nagplano ang pamunuan ng kolehiyo na maglaan ng espasyo para sa iba’t ibang samahang mag-aaral noong 2013. Bago maisagawa ito, nakipag-ugnayan kami sa CSSP Student Council na gumawa ng mga panuntunan na gagabay sa paggamit ng mga tambayan. Matapos na maipagtibay ng mga samahang mag-aaral ng kolehiyo ang ginawang mga panuntunan sa isang pangkalahatang pulong, doon lamang nasimulan ang proseso ng paglalaan ng mga tambayan para sa mga organisasyon ng kolehiyo,” Santillan said.

He said for now he has a very hectic schedule, mostly meeting the staff from eight offices under the OVCSA, namely: Diliman Learning Resource Center (DLRC), Office of Counseling and Guidance (OCG), Office of Scholarships and Student Services (OSSS), Office of Student Activities (OSA), Office of Student Housing (OSH), Student Disciplinary Tribunal (SDT), University Food Service (UFS) and UP DOST Core Group.

A history professor at the CSSP, he said his schedule begins at 6:10 a.m., when he starts the day signing papers at the OVCSA. Then at 7 a.m., he rushes to the CSSP where he teaches two subjects for the summer classes until 11 a.m. Afterwards, he spends the rest of the day performing his duties as vice chancellor.

CSSP professor Dr. Ma. Luisa R. De Leon-Bolinao and administrative officer Tess Diesta said in an interview that the vice chancellor’s time management skills came as no surprise.

“May isang conversation kami dati ni Neil noong Department Chair pa ako. Sinabi ko sa kanya, andaming gawain sa admin post. He was an associate dean, tapos nagtuturo siya and raising a family. Sabi ko, how do you do it? Sagot niya, ‘Ma’am, okay lang po iyon. Since college naman po ganito na ang ginagawa ko.’ Kaya alam kong kaya niyang gampanan ang pagiging Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs. Sanay siyang makitungo sa estudyante. Napakasipag niya at marami rin siyang projects na hindi ko alam kung saan niya kinukuha o talagang inspired lang siya,” Bolinao said.

Bolinao added that Santillan is very serious about his work but, “Masaya siyang kasama. At devoted family man din siya na hindi nakakasagabal sa work niya. Naghahatid-sundo pa iyan sa mga anak niya.”

Diesta, on the other hand, said “Friendly iyang si Neil sa staff. Tumatambay pa nga iyan sa department at sumasabay sa aming kumain. Palabiro rin siya.”

Articulating the Chancellor's mission/vision. Santillan enumerated five parts of his plans to articulate Chancellor's mission/vision of *Pride of Place, Boldness of Vision*: 1) Place-making domain, 2) Moving Bodies, 3) Moving minds, 4) Moving ideas and information; and 5) Moving hearts.

In college, Santillan said he was active in campus politics. In the Academic Year 1992-1993, he founded BUKLOD CSSP, one of UP Diliman's longest serving college-based political parties, served as chairperson of the CSSP Student Council and became active in the League of College Councils, a body under the University Student Council.

Moreover, he said he joined six student organizations in the 1990s such as the following: Amnesty International-UP, a human-rights advocacy group that focused on letterwriting campaigns; UP Nationalist Corps, an activist group that began as a volunteer arm of the University Student Council; UP Kagayhaan, a regional organization of students who hail from Misamis Oriental and its neighbouring provinces; Christ's Youth in Action, a school-based youth arm of a major Catholic lay community; and the UP Latagaw Brotherhood, a regional fraternity composed of Cebuano-speaking students from the Visayas and Mindanao that sponsored the Latagaw Cup- the annual soccer tournament in UP Diliman held in the 1980s and the 1990s.

As a student leader, he earned valuable experiences in matters about student services and other concerns. He thinks these experiences can be useful in his job at the OVCSA.

Place-making domain. He said "Mahalaga ang papel na ginampanan ng UP sa pagbubuo ng bansa. Bunsod nito, marapat lamang na malaman at mapahalagahan ng ating mga estudyante ang iba't ibang anyo ng paglilingkod sa Bayan ng mga taga-UP noon at ngayon."

He proposed that students should be involved in commemorative activities concerning historical events such as the First Quarter Storm.

However, he said "Ang problema, negatibo ang tingin sa aktibismo. Sobrang negatibo. Halimbawa, pag sasabihin (ng mga magulang), ayokong maging aktibista ang anak ko, parang nababahala ako, dahil sa UP, makasaysayan at mahalaga ang diwa at bisa ng aktibismo."

Before the student election season in the second semester, he plans to organize a convocation to allow student leaders from different political parties to have a serious discussion about activism.

He also plans to organize forums in cooperation with the University Student Council, student organizations and other University stakeholders to discuss issues affecting the University and the nation. A forum that he thinks important to undertake is to examine the constraints and prospects of student activism.

His engagement with parents during the FOP held in May 2014 raised lots of comments and questions about activism. He said “Sa limang araw ng FOP, lumitaw na maraming magulang ang may negatibong pagtingin sa aktibismo. Mahigit sampu sa kanila ang lantarang nagpahayag na ayaw nilang maging aktibista ang kanilang mga anak. Nagkuwento pa ang ilan sa kanila na napariwara ang kanilang mga kaanak bunsod ng pagsama sa mga grupong aktibista. Lubos ang aking pagkabahala sa nabanggit na mga puna’t komentaryo lalong-lalo na sa konteksto ng UP na may malalim at malawak na kasaysayan ng aktibismo. Bunsod nito, mahalagang mapagnilayan, mapag-usapan, at masuri ang kontemporaryong bisa ng aktibismo mula sa pananaw ng mga mag-aaral at ng mga akademiko.”

Moving bodies. Santillan emphasized the need to support the wellness and medical needs of the students. He said he was alarmed when he learned from Dr. Jesusa Catabui, University Health Service director, that there are malnourished students at UPD. He likes to have a wellness program to address this problem.

“Noong nagpulong kami, binanggit ni Dr. Catabui na mahalagang bilang ng mga estudyanteng may malnutrisyon ay nasa bracket E1 at E2. Bunsod nito, maaaring tumugon ang pamantasan tulad ng pagbigay ng meal stubs sa mga apektadong estudyante,” he said.

Students under Brackets E1 and E2 belong to families with the lowest income in the former Socialized Tuition and Financial Assistance Program (STFAP). Under the current Socialized Tuition System or STS, E1 now refers to FD or full discount or students who are given 100 percent free tuition, miscellaneous and laboratory fees while E2 students with 100 percent FD plus a monthly stipend of P 3,500.

Aside from the meal support, he plans to organize a book donation drive to benefit under privilege students since the process of establishing a student center will take a while. He said that the said project will be led by the Diliman Learning Resource Center.

Moving minds. Meanwhile, Santillan seeks to address the students’ low civic awareness with the help of the USC and local college councils.

He also plans to discuss with various student political parties, ways to improve the voters turn out during student elections.

“Bakit hindi tayo tumataas sa 60 percent ang bilang ng mga botante sa taunang eleksyon ng mga mag-aaral? Bakit marami sa ating mga di-gradwadong mag-aaral ang nawalan ng interes na lumahok sa eleksyon? Bakit maraming gradwadong mag-aaral ang hindi nakakaboto? Mahalagang malaman at mapag-usapan ng mga estudyante ang nabanggit na mga tanong.”

Moreover, he said he would like to consult the students about their needs. “Walang duda na may generation gap ako sa mga estudyante. Bilang VCSA, mahalagang malaman ng inyong lingkod ang kanilang mga pangangailangan at interes sa kasalukuyang konteksto. Sa layong

malaman at matugunan ang mga ito, kinakailangang magbigay ng iba't ibang espasyo ng pakikipag-ugnayan ang OVCSA sa mga estudyante,” he said.

Moving ideas and information. Santillan said there should be a venue for the students to share their ideas, research outputs and extension works through activities such as an ideas fair and an extension colloquium.

“Gusto kong malaman, ano’ng ginagawa ng organizations about extension? What are the different forms of social services that they provide? So, may mapping na gagawin... We need to document it then compile, publish and disseminate the scope of volunteer work and community service of our student organizations,” he said.

That way, he said, the industry, government sector and other stakeholders would know about the cutting-edge innovative ideas of the students.

Moving hearts. Santillan plans to tap the NSTP (National Service Training Program) to help the OVCSA address the issue on the students’ low civic awareness.

“Binansagan ang kasalukuyang kabataan bilang ‘I, me, myself’ generation o ‘selfie generation’. Sa ganitong konteksto, magiging malaking hamon ito na isulong ang dakilang adhikain ng civic awareness at social engagement sa ating mga estudyante. Makabuluhang papel ang gagampanan ng OVCSA na ipabatid at isabuhay na may pananagutang panlipunan ang bawat iskolar ng bayan,” he said.

Santillan believes that the extension colloquium is one of the interventions to this issue. He added that OVCSA is open to partnerships with the USC and other organizations.

Work-family balance. Despite his hectic schedule and work demands from the OVCSA, Santillan firmly believes in the work-family balance. He said as much as possible, he spends quality time with his family. He also said he already explained the nature of his new job to his wife Lynn and two children Zoie Neala and Lean Emmanuel.

“Magkatulad kami ni Tsanselor Tan sa pagtaguyod ng halaga ng work-family balance. Maaari magkaroon ng dedikasyon sa trabaho ngunit hindi dapat kalimutan ang iyong tungkulin sa iyong pamilya. Mahirap pero kayang gawin.”

Dr. Santillan is an Associate Professor of History in the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy where he has served as Acting Dean and Associate Dean for Administration, Student Affairs and Extension. He earned his doctorate, master’s, and bachelor’s (magna cum laude) degrees in history from the same university. He was a recipient of the 2009 Young Historian Prize from the National Commission on Culture and the Arts and the 2001 Fulbright Institute Fellowship on the Civilization of the United States at New York University’s Multinational Institute of American Studies. He has read and published papers on Philippine history, the local history of Cagayan de Oro, Philippine film history, voluntarism and contemporary Philippines. He has headed several organizations and

initiatives such as the Young Critics Circle Film Desk, the U.P. Katipunan ng mga Nakababatang Guro, the First UP Diliman Junior Faculty Congress, the Martial Law@40 Commemoration in UP Diliman, and the UP CSSP@30 Anniversary Celebration. *Source: Haidee C. Pineda, Diliman Information Office*