

## Reflections on the UPAAA 2019 Grand Reunion

By

Dr. Cris B. Liban, B.S. Geology, *magna cum laude*, '89  
2019 UPAAA Distinguished Alumnus Awardee  
in Environmental Science & Engineering



I went to the Labor Day weekend UPAAA 2019 Grand Reunion with no expectations: go and provide a message as a panelist, meet new people who are like-minded as me, attend the alumni homecoming, and maybe, make a difference.

Not knowing much about UP alumni here in the US, except for the occasional UP-ian, casual conversations of Diliman, showing a rare talent to say as fast as possible each of our student numbers, I frankly had no affinity to talk about, or look forward to the reunion. It was just another event among many.

But here was a rare opportunity to speak to the UP crowd, which I last did in my last days as a student council member at UP. That was over 30 years ago. Preparing for this talk was difficult. I thought the topic of leadership was straightforward, since I could simply draw from my successes and failures in the past decade - but it is not.

What made this most challenging is that:

- 1) I would be talking about leadership to what I expected as a mostly-Pinoy crowd,
- 2) That follow-up would be almost impossible, and
- 3) That anything that comes out of this would mostly be a pie in the sky. In other words, for these unknown variables, I had hoped to simply inspire.

But the opportunity that presented itself became an inspiration for others, and for me, an inspiration to dream...to dream of possibilities. As I told some friends who were there, there is a lot of potential. There are a lot of opportunities to tap. There are a lot of ideas to develop.

The rest of this reflection consists of some points that came to me while I was immersing myself in the past UP weekend in SFO. It was a very emotional weekend. Only in retreats have I cried this much. I never imagined that this eye-opening moment would lead to - maybe someday - more to explore.

### ***Engagement with the younger generation***

There was a lot of energy in the room brought about by our common affinity to the UP brand. It did not matter if we had retained our *aktibista* attitude or not throughout the years, but last weekend, we were one.

Very noticeable and, nothing negative, but noticeable, was the almost-homogeneity of participant demographic to be on the more mature end of the spectrum. This is the

demographic that can financially sustain attendance to events like this without any typical employer support. This demographic also has the means and time to volunteer to effect long-term results. They can also provide the leadership and insight to an organization such as UPAAA.

The UPAAA experience is not unique. I have been a member of other volunteer organizations such as the alumni association at UCLA. Most of the members in the alumni associations are in the peak or later stages of our careers. As mentioned, this is not negative but a point of reflection to ensure sustainability of the UPAAA. To this end, some ideas to consider:

- Identify, engage, and advance, to positions of responsibility, the “younger” generation;
- Establish a specific officer position specific to Younger Members or students;
- Develop a coalition of younger professionals and students beginning with a core or team of individuals who can organically grow to bigger groups; and
- Define in the bylaws and prepare for a clear transition plan towards increasing the diversity and inclusivity of UPAAA leadership.

This is nothing new and a few of the attendees are willing to participate in such an exercise. UPAAA just needs to explore and open up the possibility to do so.

### ***Creating an aura of prestige in the organization***

The UP brand is very unique in that it represents the collective spirit of excellence in education, leadership, and compassion for the common *tao*. In this day and age of influencers, there is a need to associate the UP brand with the trusted voices of the various communities we operate in here in the United States, as well as within our own Fil-Am and Fil-Im communities.

Whereas in the Philippines, the mere mention that one hails from UP evokes certain emotions, such is not necessarily true in non-Philippine or non-Filipino circles. We need to aim the same emotional impact for those of us here in the United States. Our actions and our careers should not be solely relied on to tell people that we are from UP. We should be proactive in talking about our capability and capacity to be better than those who come from the brand name US schools. We should be as equally proud to say that we come from UP as we should be proud to say that we come from the Philippines, or that we are Filipinos. I see this through some examples below:

1. Capitalizing on the credibility and names of UPAAA's recent awardees, there could be an ongoing campaign in the UPAAA and UPAA Chapters around the US to highlight the stories of these individuals on their websites. So as not to reinvent the

process, the chapters can use the biographies of these individuals that were printed in last weekend's souvenir book.

2. Invite these award winners at local events that a UPAA Chapter may either be co-sponsoring or hosting, and use them to speak on the importance of being Filipino and being a UP Graduate. It does not have to be the same individuals from last weekend, but include those who have some form of name recognition or have been recognized in the past.

3. We have marketers in this group. Why not capitalize on that depth of talent and organize a core team of people who can use the existing resources we have and come up with a UPAAA or UPAA Chapter Launch Plan.

4. One of these subtle but very effective means to promote our being Filipino or being a graduate of UP is for our graduates to interject a Filipino word or two in whatever we are talking or writing about, and or include our affinity to UP. People from Harvard, or Stanford, or other university do it all the time. Why not us?

### ***Development of network***

Filipinos are present in many parts of the world, and anecdotally even in places where Filipinos are not necessarily expected to be present. We are masters of immersion in any culture. But often we are invisible and not given the proper recognition for our contribution to the effort. Many of us desire this too.

Maybe this is our Filipino-ness, not being able to beat our chests in front of everyone, to be most proud of what we can do. We detest being *mayabang*. But in order to be a visible voice of advocacy for our causes, we are called by those who look up to us to speak about our history. As the *Iskolar ng Bayan*, we are expected to speak about the things that we have done and continually do in our work and in our communities so the greater good can benefit. Most importantly, we owe it to those who have slaved themselves to bring us the UP education, the Filipino people, to optimize our capacity and our capability to do most and best because we are the products of UP.

The networks we have and continually create are therefore as critical as our ability to talk about and be in the front and center of our individual or collective advocacies. The value of this collective is the ability of our network to expand and disseminate, not only our individual achievements, but most importantly our message to our peers and the rest of the world. Networking is not just about creating business or advancing our own goals but more so our ability to increase the circle of our influence towards individuals and organizations we would not have influenced, if not through the power of our networks.

The power of UPAAA and its chapters are in its people. How do we increase our networking capacity? Some examples:

1. Organize small networking events at nominal cost to introduce UPAAA members, one member at a time to one another. For those who are in positions to organize a *Kapihan* or similar event, leverage the UPAAA brand to be a non-financial Co-sponsor of the event (i.e., UPAAA brings the people who will pay to gain entrance to the event); or
2. Actively seek out other UP alumni within our circles then involve them in our UPAAA activities.

These examples are actually more straightforward than they sound. However, the effort should be two-way. There are those who are most actively seeking for UP alumni and there are those who are also proud to be from UP.

### ***Other Thoughts***

There are other operational reflections that come to mind, but they are more involved than what I present above. That said, other items to explore include:

- Scaled dues with maximum on the mid-scale. Younger UPAAA members and potential members can scale up on dues from \$0 on the year they graduate, to a sliding scale upwards and then, maybe as the member nears retirement, the “Lifetime Dues” if there are any, then go down to \$0 again.
- Identification of discipline leads in infrastructure, medicine, arts, media, science, funding and financing. This need not be fancy. UPMASA seems to be organized, but others are not. UPAAA can use the time of membership renewal to identify the industries where UPAAA members work in and use the information to further advance the goals of UPAAA.
- Expansion of scholarship programs and internships. There seems to be a number of these already in place. Chapters are also doing them. What I’m suggesting here is, for now, create an accounting of the financial magnitude of these scholarships and show the capacity of each UPAAA chapter. This is not designed to take those funds or recommend redirection to causes other than what the original fund was allocated. Instead, use the information as a set of talking points for UPAAA to use when soliciting funds, scholarships, endowments, grants, etc. Money talks. The amount of scholarship money within each chapter may be modest, but the collective across the US and the world is expected to be very large.

There is no rush to work through these reflections and suggestions. In fact, they are just that. In the same vein as my original emotions leading up to the reunion, no expectations. I am not in a hurry.

I reminisce the past weekend's emotions through the images of the *harana* to DaniCon; the *taas-kamao* stance during the rendition of *Bayan Ko* by Professor Ramon Acoymo; and of course, reflection on what I have done and where we all have been during the singing of *UP Naming Mahal* at the Gala's conclusion. The event was an agglomeration of talent and opportunity.

I don't want to lose the memory of it. I use it to inspire myself, and others to do more.

UP-82 (UP ito)!