

# **Student and Teacher Partnership in the Study of Tiger Grass Industry in Marigondon Norte, San Andres, Romblon: Lessons for Novice Researchers<sup>1</sup>**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper documents the struggle of authors as novice researchers, who although armed with high energy and spirit, almost lost heart to finish the project because of some issues they had to address and which they learned of only during the actual research experience.*

*Research is one of the mandated functions of State Universities and Colleges. With this, university faculty members have to juggle their time across instruction, extension, production and research. In the newly converted Romblon State University, research efforts were only ignited few years ago when a series of research capability building activities was regularly conducted and the RDE unit was fully strengthened. As novice faculty researchers, their energy to do research was high and research ideas spontaneously flowed as if the world were a big puzzle to solve. However, when they were able to avail funds for a research project about tiger grass industry, problems surfaced which challenged their capacity.*

*The study about the Profile of the Tiger Grass Industry in Marigondon Norte, San Andres, Romblon financed by the Department of Trade and Industry and the Romblon State University, was the first externally funded and thoroughly documented research output of the College of Business and Accountancy. The project proposal was approved and funds were made available as early as February 2009 but implementation was delayed because the University had no clear-cut and written guidelines for the release of research funds. This caused a lot of anxiety because this was the first approved research project of the authors and they needed to deliver.*

*So, they initiated a strategy to proceed with the study even if financial help was unavailable. The major problem identified was the need for enumerators and interviewers, since data gathering activity ate the bulk of the funds. They came up with a vision of making Marigondon Norte as the*

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<sup>1</sup> Top 5, W.C. Medrano Award for Best R&D Management Paper. Presented as paper and poster during the 20<sup>th</sup> National Convention of Research Managers, Inc. at Aklan State University, Banga, Aklan on April 6-9, 2010.

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*soft broom capital in the province of Romblon and shared this with their class. Four students who were residents of the town signified willingness to volunteer their time, effort and money for the project. During their common vacant hours, they oriented and trained their students on how to use the questionnaire for interviews and how to record responses. By Christmas vacation of 2009, they immersed in the remote, mountainous and far-flung community of Marigondon Norte for one week.*

*By February of this year, findings were already presented to the provincial offices of DTI and DOST. From the findings of the project, programs will be launched this year by DTI and DOST to help the tiger grass industry in Marigondon Norte maximize its production and market potentials through cooperative formation and product development and improvement. With the project already completed and presented, the funds intended for the study were finally released.*

*Given their research experience, it can be said that vision and initiative are two important qualities in order for researchers not to lose heart when things do not happen as expected. Faculty researchers of SUCs are also reminded by this experience that when other support factors fail, they have their students as available resource to keep their energy up. The vision must be shared to them and let them see things differently and work together as partners. Think about it, can any subject teach students better about community development than letting them live with the people? One of the student volunteers left this very challenging message: “My involvement in the study enabled me to see the real face of poverty – poverty in different forms and shapes. It just saddened me to realize that I can do nothing more but to listen and record what these tiger grass farmers have to say. I pray that help will come to them soon.”*

**Key words:** *Student and Teacher Partnership, Tiger Grass Industry, Soft Broom Industry, Lessons for Novice Research Managers*

## **RATIONALE**

In a tertiary academic institution like Romblon State University whose R&D unit has just come to life because of its series of capability building activities, research is one function feared and shunned by the large majority of the faculty. Research sounds like a high hat word for them, a misconception worsened by the frozen concept held by most senior faculty whose minds have been acculturated by fossilized and hackneyed practices. Such was the research culture that impressed us in the university when we

were hired as instructors few years ago. The institution's experts were out of the loop for decades and they already sounded irrelevant.

While we were aware that our functions as SUC faculty included research, extension and production, and while we knew that there was no faculty researches conducted, we were wondering how the senior faculty rose from the ranks. Our personal review of the instrument used in evaluating faculty performance showed that the scale for research was flawed. Instead of assessing research outputs, what was evaluated was the research potential of the faculty. Thus, majority of the faculty got the highest point in the scale, because everybody had the potential. In the eyes of a junior faculty like us, we saw the irony. Every flag ceremony, our President could be heard of long litanies about the need for the faculty to come up with research outputs. We were even scared of the 'publish or perish' belief system citing cases like the University of the Philippines in Los Baños and other universities.

It was then when our interest in research was born. It actually came as a question: "What is in research that many faculty members are afraid of it?"

Our case as SUC faculty is different from among those who were employed in government agencies doing R&D. Since we have to juggle our time among instruction, extension, production and research activities, handling a 24-unit load per semester is already too much for us. Doing research is an add-on burden all the more.

Our foretaste of being a real research manager came last year. Our first externally funded research project was about the profile of the tiger grass industry in a certain village in Romblon which was a collaborative study between the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and RSU. Our research energies were up until we encountered problems on funds downloading causing the delay of project implementation. With failed financial support system and the pressure to deliver, we assessed what resources we had and found our students as partners in completing the study.

## **OBJECTIVES**

This R&D management paper aimed to present our experience in managing a research project using our students as research partners. Specifically, the paper intended to:

1. Promote student and teacher partnership as a tool that can be used by novice SUC faculty researchers in carrying out their research projects;

2. Develop a strategic approach on funds management which can be used by faculty researchers of SUCs that do not have clear-cut policies on downloading funds for externally financed researches; and
3. Present the impact of involving students in the conduct of faculty researches

## **Project Background**

The research activity was a baseline study entitled, *Profile of the Tiger Grass Industry in Marigondon Norte, San Andres, Romblon: Basis for Developmental Intervention*. It aimed to describe the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of tiger grass farmers in the area and the tiger grass industry profiles in terms of farm inputs, farm outputs, farming practices, marketing practices and problems encountered concerning the industry. From conceptualization to completion, the project lasted for one year. It was a collaborative research work between the Department of Trade and Industry and Romblon State University with funds amounting to P37,500. DTI subsidized a research assistance of P17,500 and the rest was shouldered by the university.

I (Eddie) am the team leader and was the one who prepared the proposal, implemented the project and prepared the research manuscript. I worked in tandem with Mr. Tomas T. Faminial, a CPA who prepared the work and financial plans and correspondence. He was also the financial manager and at the same time documented the study from proposal to results presentation. The research staff was composed of four students: Baby Vanessa Gubatana, Angelica Manilay, Ma. Angelica Gacu and Melody Galido, three of whom are residents of San Andres.

## **Management Practice**

On May 4-5, 2008, we were among the participants who attended the R&D Agenda Formulation and Program Prioritization of Romblon State College (now University) conducted by STARRDEC in collaboration with PHILARM. Our hunger for new ideas was evident because we took the workshops by heart. In fact, about 80 percent of the programs formulated and prioritized came from the outputs of our group. This was the beginning of our interest in R&D activities.

On February 3, 2009, there was a call for research proposals among the faculty of the College. There were so many proposals presented and reviewed. Few months later a notice was sent to those whose research proposals were approved for funding. Luckily, our proposal on the study of

the tiger grass industry was included in the list. By March 2009, the Department of Trade and Industry released research assistance for the conduct of this baseline study. A memorandum of agreement was forged between DTI and RSU.

As novice researchers, receiving even a small amount of assistance from a funding agency was already a breakthrough for us. We sent a letter to the administration to download the funds in order for the research to start, but far from our expectations, we were asked of so many documents to present. We were told they were ignorant of the study. We were advised to talk to the auditor. And more! In our own evaluation, we did not feel the sincerity of the administration to invest in the capacity of their faculty to conduct researches.

The next time we approached the administration to follow up the funds, we were met with these words: "I know nothing about it." To our dismay, we called the DTI office and shared our burden. This was what their head said: "Okay, we will withdraw the funds. That was too small an amount for your administration not to know how to download."

We thought then that that was already the end of it all. But in our minds were echoing the words of PHILARM President and Head of CHED – UPLB Zonal Research Center, Dr. Erlinda B. Aromin: "For first time researchers, we are only granting small funds in order to gauge their capacity to deliver." This was our very first research project with assistance coming from a potential partner. So we were really challenged to deliver.

My partner and I reviewed the proposal and the memorandum of agreement. We rechecked the program of work and devised a strategy. As we took a look at our financial plans, we found out that the bulk of expenses was the payment for the enumerators and interviewers. We presented the idea among our co-teachers if they were willing to spare their time during the semestral break and join us in this project. We were still hopeful that the funds will be downloaded. But again, every time we followed this up at the administration's office, we were asked again of the documents we already submitted which they even received. October passed and we were not able to conduct the study.

We received a letter from DTI asking us the status of the study. As with anybody who wanted to prove something, our spirits were up despite these situations. We strategized so that the trust of the funding agency on our research capacity would be developed because we really believed that from this very small research project, big things were about to come.

## STRATEGIES

### Partnership with Students

As we assessed the resources that we had in order to conduct the study before the year 2009 ended, we were able to discover that our most abundant and viable resources were our students. We have noticed that most of our students' theses were just gathering dusts in the library and many of our students too were just forced to do a thesis as an academic requirement.

We were helpless. So this caused us to offer this study to a group of students who were mostly residents of the place. We were relieved when they agreed to work with us because this group could already handle the possible language barrier. They could speak the dialect and that would make the data gathering procedure faster. We shared with them our vision of Marigondon Norte as a soft broom capital of the province. We told them that this was a funded project but we needed to start working even if we were addressing some technical problems. We laid our cards and they laid theirs and soon after, we were already training them on how to gather data. By December of 2009, they joined us in the far-flung and remote barrio of Marigondon Norte in San Andres, Romblon in interviewing tiger grass farmers. Our terms of partnership are reflected in the table below:

Table 1. Roles of SUC Faculty and Student in the Partnership

ASPECT OF THE PROJECT	ROLES	
	SUC FACULTY	STUDENT
PROPOSAL PREPARATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Presents the outline of a proposed study to a group of students who will be conducting their thesis;</li> <li>▪ Advises and mentors the students on thesis proposal preparation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Enhances the background of the study</li> <li>▪ Improves the literature review</li> <li>▪ Looks for relevant materials</li> <li>▪ Polishes the research proposal</li> <li>▪ Improves the research instrument</li> </ul>
TRAINING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Provides training and orients students on data gathering procedures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Attends orientation</li> <li>▪ Rehearses interviews and recording responses</li> </ul>
DATA COLLECTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Takes the lead in the actual gathering of data.</li> <li>▪ Shows to students how the instrument will be used for the first two respondents.</li> <li>▪ Supervises the students for the next 10 respondents.</li> <li>▪ Leaves them on their own for the rest.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Conducts the survey;</li> <li>▪ Takes the role of enumerator and interviewer;</li> <li>▪ Has to stay in the area until the desired number of respondents is met.</li> <li>▪ Has to pay his/her transportation, board and lodging expenses and reproduction of questionnaires (refundable).</li> </ul>

ASPECT OF THE PROJECT	ROLES	
	SUC FACULTY	STUDENT
DATA PROCESSING AND ANALYSIS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Brainstorms with students about the common responses in open-ended items.</li> <li>▪ Creates a coding manual.</li> <li>▪ Analyzes the data.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Inputs the responses in the coding sheet based on the coding manual made.</li> </ul>
COMPLETION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Becomes the thesis adviser</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Becomes the co-researcher/ research staff of the funded study.</li> </ul>

### Complementary Tandem

Our research team complemented each other's strengths and weaknesses. While I am a passionate researcher, the passion was complemented with the technical skill of a CPA who held a track record of a number of project proposals approved and funded by different agencies. Even if funds were downloaded late, having an accountant as a research partner made the reimbursement and liquidation simpler and faster.

### DISCUSSION

It was circumstantial that we picked our students as research partners. Perhaps, partnering with students in a research project is unpopular in the research community because apprehensions about the validity of data collected could surface. We acknowledged this misgiving that was why there was a close supervision in the data gathering process. Partnership with the students could be the most accessible way by which a faculty can start a research project that can be of benefit to the community and at the same time earn a point for doing it. More and more parents were complaining about the financial demands of students doing a thesis because most of their studies were of no immediate significance and were just gathering dusts in the library. In short, it was just a waste of time and resources, a research for the sake of doing it. We were aware that this is happening not only in Romblon State University but also in other colleges and universities all throughout the country.

This strategy could be a feasible approach that can be used in a larger scale by the R&D Unit of the Romblon State University particularly in the campuses in encouraging their faculty members to engage in research activities in collaboration with funding institutions.

Partnering with students in carrying out a research project has resulted to some surprising effects we only realized later. Firstly, this can be

a tool in broadening their social concept. The academic programs at the College of Business and Accountancy are devoid of community immersion activities that students could really assess the situation and create entrepreneurial activities from the resources available. The study on tiger grass industry has brought students closer to the face of poverty. They have gone to places, interacted with the barangay officials, talked to people and empathized with their needs, wishes and wants. Their concept of a society has broadened realizing that poverty is so widespread and something must be done about it. In the words of Baby Vanessa Gubatana, one of our student partners: "My involvement in the study enabled me to see the real face of poverty – poverty in different forms and shapes. It just saddened me to realize that I can do nothing more but to listen and record what these tiger grass farmers have to say. I pray that help will come to them soon."

When results of the study were presented to the provincial DTI and DOST offices, they recommended to the College of Business and Accountancy that instead of sending business students out of the province for educational trips, they should immerse in a community through an entrepreneurial camp that would last for two to three months. They suggested for the inclusion of this course in our business curriculum. The course will be implemented in collaboration with the Department of Agriculture, NEDA, DOST, TESDA and DTI. In this camp, students will be mentored in preparing business proposals for the community. And the group who can come up with the best proposal will be awarded a prize and an opportunity to implement it.

Secondly, with proper guidance and mentoring, the research capability of the students was improved by this strategy. Ma. Angelica Gacu, another student partner, who was our best interviewer, shared her reflections. "I have been a census enumerator but I have mastered the art of interviewing with my involvement in this study. I also learned first-hand how to process data. If another study be done again, I am still willing to be a part of the team."

For novice faculty researchers like us, this study is memorable because this was our first take on research – a research that is no longer self-funded. We have realized what it is to become a research manager: that we need not necessarily do everything to deliver; that we can use people; that we can delegate tasks; that we can change plans; and still achieve our goals. Our involvement in this research project opened wider doors for us to explore and DTI assured us that more baseline studies are coming to us. Their developmental interventions which will focus on production and marketing aspects are expected to come to the community this year. They were also planning to break the monopoly of some businessmen in the area

who controlled pricing by infusing a strategy that will motivate the farmers to process the products into soft brooms since around 86 percent of them chose to sell the raw materials rather than processing them. It was estimated that the value of a bundle of dried tiger grass could increase up to 200 percent if they would be processed into soft brooms.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Student and teacher partnership in conducting a research project can help a lot in broadening the social concept of the students. It can also develop their research capability. Partnering with a faculty whose expertise is on financial management can also reduce the burden of preparing taxing financial plans and reports. In our part as faculty research partners, we have become confident of our research management skills as well. We could say that vision and initiative are two important qualities in order for researchers not to lose heart when things do not happen as expected. Faculty researchers of SUCs are also reminded by our experience that when other support factors failed, we have our students as available resource to keep our research energy up. Let us share with them our vision and encourage them to see things the way we do and work together as partners. There is no other subject that can teach our students about social awareness and community development better than letting them live with the people.

Based on this experience, we recommend that the administration of the university through its R&D unit should include in its Research Manual the details of the procedures to be followed in requesting for download of research funds from funding agencies. There should also be coordination between the R&D unit and the administration to prevent repetitive submission of the same documents. First time research managers are encouraged to utilize students in their funded research project as data collectors. We also advise them to start with small research projects. It is good to start small and deliver than start big and fail! We also recommend that novice researchers should tandem with a faculty who is adept at financial management like the budget officer or an accounting educator. In the light of this R&D management experience, we also recommend that the curriculum for the program BS Business Administration of RSU be reviewed and the suggested community immersion 'entrepreneurial camp' be integrated into the curriculum to harness the research potential and widen the social concept of the students thereby making them valuable research partners.