

Assessing Graduate Student Services in a Philippine State University: Basis for Sustainable Program Improvement

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable quality educational services and improvement of instruction have been among the major concerns of the government in collaboration with various sectors. Student services are essential institutional mechanisms for supporting students' academic adjustment, welfare, engagement, and holistic development. This study aimed to assess the graduate student services program of a Philippine state university as basis for sustainable program improvement utilizing a descriptive quantitative research design and data were gathered from 350 graduate students through a validated survey questionnaire based on recognized student affairs and services standards set by the Commission on Higher Education and accrediting agencies. The study examined seven service dimensions: student admission and policies, student orientation, organization and administration, guidance programs and services, student assistance program, alumni services, and co-curricular programs and activities. Findings revealed that the graduate student services program was generally perceived as very evident, indicating that most student services were visible and functional from the perspective of graduate students. In terms of strengths and areas for improvement, co-curricular programs and activities, student admission and policies, and student orientation emerged as the major strengths of the program, while the student assistance program was identified as the priority area for improvement. Based on these findings, the proposed sustainable program improvement activities focused on sustaining highly rated services, strengthening student assistance, improving information dissemination, enhancing guidance and alumni services, reviewing administrative support systems, building external partnerships, and institutionalizing annual graduate student services assessment. The study concludes that the university has established generally evident graduate student services; however, sustainable improvement requires more coordinated, accessible, and responsive assistance-related services. The findings provide an evidence-based framework for designing a more responsive and sustainable graduate student services program that may promote a better educational learning environment, leading to quality education.

Keywords: Graduate student services, student affairs and services, student assistance, student engagement, sustainable program improvement, Philippine higher education

INTRODUCTION

The effectiveness of any educational institution hinges significantly on the strength of its student services program. Student services are important components of higher education because they support students' academic engagement, personal development, institutional adjustment, and overall learning experience. Beyond classroom instruction, higher education institutions are expected to provide support systems that enable students to participate meaningfully in academic and institutional life. Student engagement is closely connected to the interaction between learners, institutional structures, and educational environments; therefore, student services form an important part of student success in higher education (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). In the Philippine higher education context, Student Affairs and Services are recognized as institutional mechanisms that complement academic instruction and promote holistic student development. The Commission on Higher Education requires higher education institutions to provide student-centered activities and services that support academic instruction, promote student welfare, and prepare students for responsible participation in society

(Commission on Higher Education [CHED], 2013). Thus, student services are not merely auxiliary provisions but essential elements of quality assurance, institutional responsiveness, and student development.

Student support services commonly include admission-related assistance, orientation, guidance and counseling, student assistance, administrative support, alumni services, and co-curricular engagement. These services help students access information, seek appropriate assistance, manage academic and personal concerns, and participate in institutional activities. Evidence from higher education research shows that campus support services contribute to student performance, persistence, and degree completion, particularly when students are aware of and able to access available services (Johnson et al., 2022). In this sense, the effectiveness of student services depends not only on their formal existence but also on their visibility, accessibility, and responsiveness to students' needs.

The quality of student services also influences how students evaluate their educational experience. Service quality in higher education is associated with student satisfaction when institutions provide responsive personnel, adequate facilities, effective support activities, relevant programs, and accessible support mechanisms (Hai, 2022). In graduate education, this responsiveness is particularly important because many students balance advanced academic work with employment, family responsibilities, research demands, and professional development goals. Graduate student services, therefore, must respond to both academic and non-academic concerns that shape students' capacity to participate, persist, and succeed in their programs.

Regular assessment of student services is necessary because the effectiveness of institutional support depends largely on how students experience and perceive available services. Students' voices provide important evidence for determining whether support systems are accessible, personalized, student-centered, and responsive to their needs (Hitches et al., 2025). Through assessment, institutions can identify strengths, recognize areas requiring improvement, and design activities that respond to students' actual experiences. Recent research also supports the value of assessing Student Affairs and Services as a basis for institutional improvement. Lumasag and Gawahan (2025) examined the implementation and compliance of Student Affairs and Services in relation to CHED Memorandum Order No. 09, series of 2013 and emphasized that assessment findings can inform intervention programs for improving student welfare and service quality. This provides a relevant foundation for the present study, which similarly uses students' assessment as basis for sustainable program improvement.

Despite the recognized importance of student services, there remains a need for institution-based evidence on how graduate students perceive the extent to which such services are evident across key service dimensions. This is particularly relevant in Philippine state universities, where graduate students may have varied academic, administrative, professional, and personal support needs. Without regular assessment, institutions may overlook service areas that require strengthening or fail to align student services with the changing expectations of graduate learners.

This study is tied up primarily on Kahu and Nelson's (2018) student engagement framework, which views student success as shaped by the interaction between students and the institutional environment. This framework is appropriate because the study examines how graduate students perceive the presence and visibility of institutional support services. Tinto's (2023) perspective on student engagement and persistence is also used as a supporting lens, particularly in interpreting the importance of admission, orientation, co-curricular participation, and institutional support in strengthening students' connection with the university. From these perspectives, graduate student services are viewed not merely as administrative functions but as institutional mechanisms that may support academic adjustment, participation, welfare, and holistic development.

This study assessed the graduate student services program in a Philippine state university as perceived by graduate students. Specifically, it examined seven dimensions of student services: student admission and policies, student orientation, organization and administration, guidance programs and services, student assistance program, alumni services, and co-curricular programs and activities. The findings served as basis for

identifying strengths, determining areas for improvement, and proposing sustainable program improvement activities that may enhance the quality, responsiveness, and relevance of graduate student services.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the extent to which the graduate student services program is evident as perceived by graduate students in terms of the following dimensions?
 - 1.1 Student admission and policies
 - 1.2 Student orientation
 - 1.3 Organization and administration
 - 1.4 Guidance programs and services
 - 1.5 Student assistance program
 - 1.6 Alumni services
 - 1.7 Co-curricular programs and activities
2. Which dimensions of the graduate student services program are perceived as strengths and which require improvement?
3. What sustainable program improvement activities may be proposed based on the findings of the study?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design using the survey method. This design was appropriate because the study aimed to determine the extent to which the graduate student services program was evident as perceived by graduate students and to use the findings as basis for identifying strengths, areas for improvement, and sustainable program improvement activities. The study was conducted in the Graduate School of a Philippine state university during Academic Year 2023–2024. The respondents were 350 students enrolled in master's and doctoral programs who were selected through purposive sampling because of their direct experience with the graduate student services program. The sample size was determined using the Raosoft sample size calculator.

A structured survey questionnaire was used as the main data-gathering instrument. The questionnaire was based on CHED and AACUP recommendations on student affairs and services and was modified to suit the graduate education context. It covered seven dimensions: student admission and policies, student orientation, organization and administration, guidance programs and services, student assistance program, alumni services, and co-curricular programs and activities. The instrument used a four-point Likert-type scale with the following interpretation: 3.50–4.00, Very Evident; 2.50–3.49, Evident; 1.50–2.49, Less Evident; and 1.00–1.49, Least Evident. The questionnaire was validated by three experts, and a pilot test was conducted to determine its reliability with the assistance of the university statistician. Before data collection, permission was secured from the appropriate university offices. The respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. The completed questionnaires were retrieved, checked, encoded, and prepared for statistical analysis.

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Mean scores were used to determine the extent to which the graduate student services program was evident across the seven dimensions, while ranking was used to identify perceived strengths and areas requiring improvement. The results served as basis for proposing sustainable program improvement activities.

RESULTS

The findings provide a descriptive assessment of the graduate student services program based on the perceptions of graduate students. The presentation is organized according to the three research questions of the study. First, the results show the extent to which the graduate student services program was evident across the seven service dimensions. Second, the findings identify the service dimensions perceived as strengths and those requiring improvement based on their mean scores and rankings. Third, the results serve as basis for the proposed sustainable program improvement activities intended to strengthen the quality, responsiveness, and sustainability of graduate student services. Mean scores, verbal interpretations, and rankings were used to summarize the respondents' assessment and to provide an empirical basis for the proposed improvement plan.

Summary of the Extent to Which Graduate Student Services Were Evident

Table 1 presents the extent to which the graduate student services program was evident as perceived by the respondents. The results show that the program was generally perceived as Very Evident, with an overall mean score of 3.57. Among the seven dimensions, co-curricular programs and activities ranked first, obtained the highest mean score of 3.65, and was interpreted as Very Evident signifying that the core strength of the university lies on its establishment of programs and activities that would provide opportunities and enhance students' personal and social connections for the betterment of the school and community.

Table 1. Summary of the Mean Rating on the Extent to Which Graduate Student Services Were Evident

	Dimension	Mean	Interpretation	Rank
1.	Student admission and policies	3.63	Very Evident	2
2.	Student orientation	3.62	Very Evident	3
3.	Organization and administration	3.58	Very Evident	5
4.	Guidance programs and services	3.59	Very Evident	4
5.	Student assistance program	3.34	Evident	7
6.	Alumni services	3.55	Very Evident	6
7.	Co-curricular programs and activities	3.65	Evident	1
	Overall Mean	3.57	Very Evident	

As can be gleaned from the table above, the graduate student services program in terms of the dimension on student admission and policies ranked second which obtained a mean score of 3.63, and was interpreted as Very Evident. Student orientation ranked third, garnered a mean score of 3.62, and was interpreted as Very Evident. Guidance programs and services ranked fourth, obtained a mean score of 3.59, and was interpreted as Very Evident. Organization and administration ranked fifth, received a mean score of 3.58, and was interpreted as Very Evident. Alumni services ranked sixth, gained a mean score of 3.55, and was interpreted as Very Evident. Meanwhile, the student assistance program ranked seventh, obtained the lowest mean score of 3.34, and was interpreted as Evident. These findings indicate that the graduate student services program was generally visible and accessible across the assessed dimensions.

The highest-ranked dimensions, particularly co-curricular programs and activities, student admission and policies, and student orientation, may be considered the major strengths of the program. These results suggest that the university has established evident mechanisms for student engagement, admission processes, and transition support. On the other hand, the lowest-ranked dimension was the student assistance program.

Although it was still positively rated, it was the only dimension interpreted as Evident rather than Very Evident. This suggests that services related to financial aid, health services, food services, housing facilities, and transportation assistance require further review and strengthening.

Overall, the ranking of the seven dimensions provides a clear basis for identifying program strengths and determining priority areas for sustainable improvement.

Strengths and Areas for Improvement of the Graduate Student Services Program

Table 2 presents a synthesis of the service dimensions according to their strategic classification as major strengths, areas for sustaining and enhancement, area for strengthening, and priority area for improvement. Unlike Table 1, which presents the extent to which each service dimension was evident, Table 2 interprets the results for program decision-making. This classification provides a clearer basis for determining which services should be sustained, which should be enhanced, and which should be prioritized for improvement.

Table 2. Classification of Service Dimensions Based on Strengths and Areas for Improvement

	Strategic Classification	Service Dimensions	Empirical Basis	Program Implication
1.	Major strengths	Co-curricular programs and activities; student admission and policies; student orientation	These dimensions obtained the highest ratings and were interpreted as Very Evident.	Sustain and institutionalize these services through regular evaluation, updated information materials, and continued student engagement activities.
2.	Areas for sustaining and enhancement	Guidance programs and services; organization and administration	These dimensions were interpreted as Very Evident but ranked lower than the major strengths.	Maintain these services while improving counseling outreach, career guidance, administrative coordination, staffing, facilities, and budget support.
3.	Area for strengthening	Alumni services	This dimension was interpreted as Very Evident but ranked near the lower end among the seven service areas.	Strengthen alumni tracking, communication, mentoring, networking, and alumni participation in graduate student development.
4.	Priority area for improvement	Student assistance program	This dimension obtained the lowest rating and was the only area interpreted as Evident rather than Very Evident.	Prioritize improvements in financial aid, health services, food services, housing support, transportation assistance, and integrated student assistance mechanisms.

The results indicate that co-curricular programs and activities, student admission and policies, and student orientation served as the major strengths of the graduate student services program. These dimensions should be sustained because they reflect the most visible and positively perceived areas of service delivery. Guidance programs and services and organization and administration were classified as areas for sustaining and enhancement because they were positively rated but still require continuous improvement in responsiveness, coordination, and service delivery. Alumni services were classified as an area for strengthening, particularly in terms of alumni tracking, mentoring, networking, and graduate student support. Meanwhile, the student assistance program was identified as the priority area for improvement because it obtained the lowest rating and was the only dimension interpreted as Evident rather than Very Evident.

Sustainable Program Improvement Activities Based on the Findings

Table 3 presents the strategic sustainable program improvement plan based on the findings of the study. Instead of presenting separate activities for all seven dimensions, the proposed plan was organized according to four strategic focuses: sustaining major strengths, enhancing positively rated but lower-ranked services, prioritizing student assistance services, and institutionalizing monitoring and continuous improvement. This approach is more appropriate because it recognizes both the strengths and the areas that require further improvement.

Table 3. Strategic Sustainable Program Improvement Plan for Graduate Student Services

	Strategic Focus	Basis from Findings	Proposed Activities	Expected Outcome
1.	Sustain major strengths	Co-curricular programs and activities, student admission and policies, and student orientation obtained the highest mean scores and were interpreted as Very Evident.	Continue regular evaluation of co-curricular activities; sustain transparent admission procedures; update admission and orientation materials in printed and online platforms; strengthen faculty mentorship, student leadership activities, peer support, and online orientation modules.	Sustained visibility, accessibility, and effectiveness of the strongest student services.
2.	Enhance positively rated but lower-ranked services	Guidance programs and services, organization and administration, and alumni services were interpreted as Very Evident but ranked lower than the major strengths.	Expand counseling outreach, career guidance, placement, and follow-up services; review staffing, facilities, equipment, and budget allocation; strengthen coordination among student service units; develop a graduate alumni database; organize alumni mentoring, networking, and professional development activities.	More responsive guidance services, stronger administrative support, and more active alumni participation in graduate student development.
3.	Prioritize student assistance services		Strengthen financial aid management, health services, food services, housing support, and transportation assistance; establish an integrated graduate student assistance desk; conduct targeted information campaigns on available support services; forge partnerships with local government units, alumni, community organizations, and other stakeholders.	More accessible, coordinated, and responsive assistance services for graduate students.
4.	Institutionalize monitoring and continuous improvement	Sustainable improvement requires regular assessment across all student service areas.	Conduct an annual graduate student services assessment; prepare an annual student services improvement report; use assessment results for planning, budgeting, policy review, and service redesign; involve students in evaluating services and recommending improvements.	Evidence-based, participatory, and sustainable improvement of graduate student services.

The first strategic focus is to sustain the major strengths of the graduate student services program. Co-curricular programs and activities, student admission and policies, and student orientation received the highest ratings and were interpreted as Very Evident. Thus, the proposed activities for these areas aim to maintain effective practices, strengthen student engagement, update communication materials, and continue regular evaluation.

The second strategic focus is to enhance positively rated but lower-ranked services. Guidance programs and services, organization and administration, and alumni services were also interpreted as Very Evident, but their lower ranking suggests the need for continuous enhancement. The proposed activities therefore focus on expanding counseling outreach, strengthening career guidance and placement services, reviewing administrative support, and improving alumni engagement.

The third strategic focus is to prioritize student assistance services. This dimension requires the greatest attention because it obtained the lowest mean score and was interpreted as Evident. The proposed activities emphasize the improvement of financial aid management, health services, food services, housing support, transportation assistance, and information dissemination. These actions are intended to make student assistance services more accessible and responsive to the needs of graduate students.

The fourth strategic focus is to institutionalize monitoring and continuous improvement. Since sustainable program improvement requires regular evidence-based planning, the study proposes the conduct of annual student services assessment, preparation of improvement reports, and use of assessment results in planning, budgeting, policy review, and service redesign.

Overall, this strategic approach ensures that the proposed activities are directly anchored on the findings while supporting the long-term sustainability of graduate student services.

DISCUSSION

Graduate Student Services as Visible Institutional Support

In this study, the extent to which graduate student services were evident is treated not merely as an indication of service availability, but as a reflection of how graduate students encounter, recognize, and experience institutional support. The discussion therefore interprets the findings as evidence of the university's graduate student support ecosystem, highlighting both the services that are strongly visible to students and the areas where visibility, accessibility, and responsiveness require further strengthening.

The findings affirm the important role of student services in supporting student engagement and success in higher education. The generally favorable assessment across the service dimensions suggests that the university has established support mechanisms that graduate students recognize as part of their academic and institutional experience. This is consistent with Kahu and Nelson's (2018) view that student success is shaped by the interaction between learners, institutional structures, and the educational environment. In this sense, evident student services may strengthen students' connection with the institution by supporting adjustment, participation, and engagement. The findings also support broader engagement literature, particularly the view that student engagement is multidimensional and linked with both student and institutional outcomes. Bowden et al. (2021) emphasized that student engagement involves affective, social, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions and is associated with outcomes such as student well-being, self-efficacy, self-esteem, transformative learning, and institutional reputation. The strong visibility of co-curricular programs and activities in the present study affirms this perspective because such activities provide opportunities for participation, leadership, interaction, and holistic development beyond classroom instruction.

In the Philippine higher education context, the results also affirm the expected function of Student Affairs and Services. CHED Memorandum Order No. 09, series of 2013 recognizes Student Affairs and Services as institutional mechanisms that support academic instruction, promote student welfare, and contribute to holistic student development (Commission on Higher Education [CHED], 2013). The generally positive assessment of admission services, orientation, guidance programs, organization and administration, alumni services, and co-

curricular activities suggests that the university's student services program largely performs this complementary role in graduate education.

The strong visibility of admission, orientation, and co-curricular services further supports research showing that campus support services may contribute to student performance, persistence, and degree completion when students are aware of and able to access them. Johnson et al. (2022) emphasized that student support services facilitate student success when these services are utilized and made accessible to students. Similarly, Tinto (2023) argued that engagement and student networks matter in persistence because students are more likely to continue when they are meaningfully connected to the academic and social environment. In the present study, the favorable assessment of entry, transition, and engagement-related services suggests that the university has established mechanisms that help graduate students understand institutional procedures, become familiar with available support, and participate in institutional life.

However, the findings also contrast with literature emphasizing that student support should be consistently accessible, responsive, and adequate across service areas. In this study, the student assistance program emerged as the least evident dimension, particularly in services related to financial aid, health services, food services, housing support, and transportation assistance. This suggests that although the overall student services program was positively perceived, practical assistance-related services may not yet be as visible, accessible, or sufficient as the other dimensions. This partly contrasts with the ideal condition described in student support literature, where assistance mechanisms are expected to reduce barriers to persistence and completion. This contrast becomes more evident when the findings are viewed through the lens of service quality. Hai (2022) found that student satisfaction with higher education service quality is influenced by facilities, institutional ability to serve, educational activities, student support activities, and educational programs. Amoako et al. (2023) similarly identified administrative services, academic services, and physical evidence as important components of service quality in higher education. In relation to these studies, the lower rating of student assistance in the present study indicates that facilities, welfare services, and assistance mechanisms require more focused institutional attention to ensure that student support is not only present but also sufficiently responsive to graduate students' practical needs.

The findings are also significant in relation to graduate students' specific circumstances. Agbayani and Paglinawan (2025) reported that graduate working students experience challenges in balancing academic, professional, financial, emotional, and personal responsibilities. This literature helps explain why student assistance services are particularly important in graduate education. If assistance-related services are less evident, graduate students who manage multiple roles may experience additional barriers in accessing support, sustaining participation, and completing academic requirements.

The lower rating of student assistance also aligns with recent literature on student well-being and support. Wilson Fadji and Eloff (2024) emphasized that student well-being in higher education is supported not only by academic resources but also by communication, peer support, psychosocial support, and institutional provisioning. In contrast, the present findings suggest that some practical support areas may still require stronger coordination and visibility. This means that sustainable improvement should not only focus on academic or engagement-oriented services but also on welfare-related services that directly affect students' capacity to participate meaningfully in graduate education.

Furthermore, the findings support the need to listen to student voice in evaluating institutional support. Hitches et al. (2025) emphasized that student support services should be accessible, personalized, and responsive to students' needs. Mireku et al. (2024), in their systematic review of student support services provision in higher education, also highlighted the importance of examining how support services are provided, accessed, and improved. These studies affirm the value of the present assessment because students' perceptions provide practical evidence on which services are already visible and which areas require further strengthening. The findings also resonate with recent research in state university settings. Pineda et al. (2025) found that students' awareness and satisfaction with Student Affairs and Services varied across service areas and recommended strengthening scholarship and financial assistance, health services, and career and job placement services. This parallels the present study, where co-curricular and engagement-related services were strongly evident, while

assistance-related services required greater attention. This similarity suggests that student organizations and activities may often be more visible to students than assistance services, which require more deliberate communication, accessibility, and coordination.

Overall, the findings support recent IJRISS research showing that assessment of Student Affairs and Services can serve as a basis for institutional intervention and quality improvement. Lumasag and Gawahan (2025) emphasized that assessment findings can guide intervention programs for improving student welfare and service quality. The present study similarly demonstrates that assessment results can reveal both visible institutional strengths and priority areas for improvement. Therefore, sustainable program improvement should involve two complementary actions: sustaining services that are already highly evident and strengthening assistance-related, administrative, alumni, and guidance services that require further enhancement.

Service Strengths and Priority Areas for Enhancement

The classification of the graduate student services program into major strengths, areas for enhancement, an area for strengthening, and a priority area for improvement provides a more decision-oriented interpretation of the findings. While the first research question described the extent to which each service dimension was evident, the second research question identifies what these results imply for program maintenance and improvement. This distinction is important because the results should not merely be read as rankings; rather, they should guide which services need to be sustained, strengthened, or prioritized in future planning.

The major strengths of the graduate student services program were co-curricular programs and activities, student admission and policies, and student orientation. These dimensions represent the most visible and positively perceived components of the program. Their classification as major strengths suggests that the university has established functional mechanisms for student engagement, admission processes, and transition support. This finding affirms Kahu and Nelson's (2018) student engagement framework, which views student success as shaped by the interaction between students and the institutional environment. In this study, the highly rated service dimensions may be understood as institutional structures that help graduate students participate in academic and institutional life. The identification of co-curricular programs and activities as a major strength is also consistent with the broader literature on engagement and persistence. Bowden et al. (2021) emphasized that student engagement is multidimensional and is associated with well-being, self-efficacy, transformative learning, and institutional outcomes. Similarly, Tinto (2023) argued that engagement and social networks matter in student persistence. The strong position of co-curricular activities therefore suggests that the university provides opportunities for participation, leadership, interaction, and holistic development beyond classroom instruction. Student admission and policies and student orientation also emerged as major strengths, indicating that graduate students positively perceived the university's entry and transition mechanisms. These findings affirm Johnson et al.'s (2022) observation that student support services contribute to student success when students are aware of and able to access available services. Clear admission procedures and effective orientation activities help students understand institutional expectations, navigate university processes, and become familiar with available academic and non-academic support systems. These services are particularly important in graduate education, where students often balance academic work with professional, family, and personal responsibilities.

Guidance programs and services and organization and administration were classified as areas for sustaining and enhancement. This classification recognizes that these services were positively perceived but still require continuous improvement to remain responsive to student needs. Hitches et al. (2025) emphasized that students' voices are important in identifying how university support services can become more accessible, personalized, and responsive. Thus, the relatively lower position of these dimensions should not be interpreted as program failure but as evidence that service delivery can still be refined through stronger outreach, coordination, and responsiveness. The need to enhance organization and administration is also supported by service quality literature. Hai (2022) found that student satisfaction with higher education service quality is influenced by facilities, institutional capacity to serve, support activities, and educational programs. Amoako et al. (2023) similarly emphasized that administrative services and physical evidence are important components of service quality in higher education. In the context of the present study, organization and administration

should therefore be strengthened through regular review of staffing, facilities, equipment, budget allocation, coordination, and service delivery processes. Alumni services were classified as an area for strengthening. Although this dimension was still positively rated, its classification indicates the need to make alumni services more visible, active, and directly useful to graduate students. Alumni services can support graduate students through career mentoring, professional networking, research collaboration, and institutional linkages. Dollinger et al. (2019) found that university alumni mentoring programs can benefit both students and alumni and may improve university engagement. Strengthening alumni databases, mentoring programs, networking activities, and alumni-led professional development initiatives may therefore help make alumni services more responsive to the needs of graduate students.

The student assistance program was classified as the priority area for improvement because it obtained the lowest rating among the service dimensions and was the only dimension interpreted as Evident rather than Very Evident. This finding suggests that assistance-related services require focused attention, particularly in relation to financial aid, health services, food services, housing support, and transportation assistance. The finding also contrasts with the ideal function of Student Affairs and Services in Philippine higher education, where such services are expected to promote student welfare and holistic development (Commission on Higher Education [CHED], 2013). Thus, student assistance should be treated not as a secondary service but as a central component of graduate student support. The priority given to student assistance is especially important in the graduate school context. Agbayani and Paglinawan (2025) found that graduate working students experience challenges related to time management, financial strain, emotional exhaustion, and the balancing of academic, professional, and personal responsibilities. This helps explain why assistance-related services are critical for graduate students. Financial aid, health services, food services, housing support, and transportation assistance may directly affect students' capacity to participate in academic life and continue their programs. The classification of student assistance as a priority improvement area is further supported by literature on students' basic needs. Balzer Carr and London (2020) emphasized that student success initiatives increasingly address food, housing, and financial hardships because these concerns affect students' capacity to remain and succeed in higher education. Similarly, Collier-Tenison and Polk-Hampton (2024) described a case-management approach in higher education that connects students with academic, financial, mental health, and community resources. These studies support the need for an integrated graduate student assistance mechanism that can coordinate referrals, communicate available services, and respond to students' welfare-related concerns more effectively.

The findings also suggest the need for stronger communication and digital access to student services. Walsh et al. (2024) found that online academic support can improve students' access to services, engagement, satisfaction, motivation, retention, and course completion when properly designed and implemented. This supports the need to improve information dissemination through centralized online platforms, digital orientation materials, and updated service announcements. Such mechanisms may increase students' awareness and utilization of available student support services.

Generally, the findings show that the graduate student services program has identifiable strengths and clear areas for improvement. The major strengths should be sustained because they reflect visible and functional support mechanisms, while lower-ranked services should be enhanced to improve responsiveness and accessibility. The student assistance program requires priority attention because it represents the most evident area for program improvement. This supports Lumasag and Gawahan's (2025) view that assessment of Student Affairs and Services can serve as basis for identifying strengths, weaknesses, and appropriate intervention programs. Therefore, the classification of service dimensions provides a practical basis for developing sustainable improvement activities that preserve effective services while addressing areas that require further strengthening.

Strategic Sustainable Program Improvement of Graduate Student Services

The proposed sustainable program improvement plan was developed from the assessment results and organized around four strategic directions: sustaining major strengths, enhancing positively rated but lower-ranked services, prioritizing student assistance, and institutionalizing continuous monitoring and improvement.

This approach recognizes that sustainable program development should not focus only on deficiencies. It should also preserve services that are already functioning well while strengthening areas that require further attention.

The first direction focuses on sustaining the major strengths of the graduate student services program, particularly co-curricular programs and activities, student admission and policies, and student orientation. These areas were identified as strengths because they were more visible and positively assessed by the respondents. Sustaining these services is important because student engagement is shaped by students' interaction with institutional structures and the educational environment (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Similarly, Bowden et al. (2021) emphasized that engagement is multidimensional and contributes to student well-being, self-efficacy, learning, and institutional outcomes. Thus, the proposed activities on maintaining co-curricular programs, strengthening leadership training, updating admission information, and improving orientation mechanisms are intended to preserve the services that already support graduate students' entry, transition, and institutional participation. The proposed activities for admission and orientation also support the idea that student support must begin early in the student life cycle. Clear admission procedures, accessible information, and effective orientation help students understand institutional expectations and available services. Johnson et al. (2022) emphasized that campus support services contribute to student success when students are aware of and able to access them. Tinto (2023) also argued that engagement and meaningful connections within the academic environment matter in student persistence. Therefore, sustaining admission and orientation services is not merely procedural; it contributes to graduate students' adjustment, sense of direction, and connection with the institution.

The second direction focuses on enhancing positively rated but lower-ranked services, particularly guidance programs and services, organization and administration, and alumni services. Although these areas were still favorably assessed, their lower ranking suggests that they require continuous enhancement. This is consistent with Hitches et al. (2025) view that student voices are important in identifying how university support services can become more accessible, personalized, and responsive. In the present study, the proposed activities on expanded counseling outreach, career guidance, placement and follow-up, administrative coordination, staffing review, facilities improvement, and budget review are meant to strengthen the responsiveness and sustainability of student services. The proposed improvement of organization and administration is also supported by service quality literature. Hai (2022) found that student satisfaction with higher education service quality is influenced by facilities, support activities, institutional ability to serve, and educational programs. Amoako et al. (2023) similarly emphasized that administrative services and physical evidence are important components of service quality in higher education. These studies support the proposed review of staffing, facilities, equipment, budget allocation, and coordination mechanisms. A sustainable student services program requires not only visible activities but also adequate administrative capacity to deliver services consistently. The strengthening of alumni services is also relevant to sustainable program improvement. Alumni can support graduate students through mentoring, career networking, professional linkages, and research-related collaboration. Dollinger et al. (2019) found that alumni mentoring programs may benefit both students and alumni and can improve university engagement. Thus, the proposed development of a graduate alumni database, alumni mentoring activities, networking events, and professional development initiatives can make alumni services more active and directly useful to graduate students.

The third direction gives priority to the student assistance program because it was the lowest-rated dimension and was interpreted only as Evident. This indicates that assistance-related services require more focused improvement. The proposed activities on financial aid management, health services, food services, housing support, transportation assistance, and an integrated graduate student assistance desk respond directly to this finding. CHED Memorandum Order No. 09, series of 2013 emphasizes that Student Affairs and Services should support student welfare and holistic development (Commission on Higher Education [CHED], 2013). Therefore, assistance services should be treated as central to graduate student support rather than as peripheral services. The priority given to student assistance is further supported by literature on students' basic needs and institutional support. Balzer Carr and London (2020) emphasized that student success initiatives increasingly address food, housing, and financial hardships because these needs affect students' capacity to remain and succeed in higher education. Collier-Tenison and Polk-Hampton (2024) also described a case-management

approach in higher education that connects students to academic, financial, mental health, and community resources. These studies support the recommendation to establish an integrated assistance mechanism that can help graduate students access different forms of support through a more coordinated system. The need to strengthen student assistance is especially relevant in graduate education. Agbayani and Paglinawan (2025) found that graduate working students experience challenges related to time management, financial strain, emotional exhaustion, and the balancing of academic, professional, and personal responsibilities. For this reason, services such as financial aid, health support, food services, transportation, and housing-related assistance may directly affect graduate students' ability to participate in academic life and complete their requirements. Wilson Fadiji and Eloff (2024) also emphasized that student well-being is supported not only by academic resources but also by communication, psychosocial support, peer support, and institutional provisioning. These sources strengthen the need for assistance services that are visible, accessible, coordinated, and responsive.

The fourth direction focuses on institutionalizing monitoring and continuous improvement. Sustainable program improvement requires regular assessment, evidence-based planning, and the use of student feedback in decision-making. Mireku et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of examining how student support services are provided, accessed, and improved in higher education. Walsh et al. (2024) also showed that online academic student support can improve access, engagement, satisfaction, motivation, retention, and course completion when properly designed. These findings support the proposed annual graduate student services assessment, preparation of improvement reports, centralized online information system, and use of results in planning, budgeting, and service redesign.

The proposed sustainable program improvement plan is also consistent with recent studies on Student Affairs and Services assessment. Pineda et al. (2025) recommended strengthening scholarship and financial assistance, health services, and career and job placement services in a state university context. Lumasag and Gawahan (2025) likewise emphasized that assessment of Student Affairs and Services can serve as a basis for intervention planning and service improvement. The present study follows this evidence-based direction by translating assessment results into strategic actions that maintain strengths, enhance lower-ranked areas, and prioritize the most evident service gaps. Hence, the proposed activities represent a balanced sustainability-and-improvement plan for graduate student services. The plan does not assume that highly rated services no longer need attention, nor does it treat all services as equally problematic. Instead, it sustains the strongest dimensions, enhances positively rated but lower-ranked areas, prioritizes student assistance, and institutionalizes regular monitoring. This makes the proposed plan directly anchored on the findings and responsive to the long-term goal of sustainable improvement in graduate student services.

CONCLUSION

Viewed through Kahu and Nelson's student engagement framework, the findings demonstrate that the graduate student services program in a Philippine state university may function as part of the institutional environment that supports graduate students' academic adjustment, participation, welfare, and holistic development.

The favorable assessment across most service dimensions indicates that the institution has established visible support mechanisms for graduate students, particularly in co-curricular programs and activities, student admission and policies, student orientation, guidance programs and services, organization and administration, and alumni services. The findings further show that the major strengths of the program are found in co-curricular programs and activities, student admission and policies, and student orientation. These dimensions reflect the university's evident efforts to support student engagement, provide clear admission processes, and assist students in their transition to graduate school. In line with Tinto's perspective on engagement and persistence, these services may help strengthen students' connection with the institution by supporting their entry, participation, and continued involvement in academic life. However, sustainable program improvement requires attention to relatively lower-rated service areas. The student assistance program emerged as the priority area for improvement, particularly in relation to financial aid, health services, food services, housing support, and transportation assistance. Although this dimension was still positively perceived, its lower rating indicates the need for more accessible, coordinated, and responsive assistance services for graduate students.

Alumni services, organization and administration, and selected guidance-related services also require continuous enhancement to strengthen service delivery and institutional support.

Overall, the proposed sustainable program improvement activities should follow a balanced approach: sustaining services that are already strongly evident, enhancing positively rated but lower-ranked areas, prioritizing student assistance services, and institutionalizing continuous monitoring and evaluation. Anchored on the student engagement framework, the sustainability of graduate student services depends not only on the existence of support programs but also on how effectively these services connect students with academic, social, administrative, and welfare-related support systems. By using assessment results as basis for planning, the university can develop a more responsive, inclusive, and sustainable graduate student services program that addresses the changing academic, professional, and personal needs of graduate students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are offered to strengthen the sustainability and responsiveness of the graduate student services program.

Firstly, the university should sustain the highly rated service dimensions, particularly co-curricular programs and activities, student admission and policies, and student orientation. These areas may be institutionalized through regular evaluation, updated admission and orientation materials, faculty and staff support, leadership development activities, peer mentoring, and accessible online information platforms. Sustaining these services is necessary to maintain students' positive experience of entry, transition, and institutional engagement. The university may include this dimension in their sustainability plan in coordination with the administrative support, community involvement and transparency.

Secondly, the student assistance program should be prioritized for improvement, as it emerged as the lowest-rated dimension. The university should strengthen financial aid management through stable and diversified funding, integrated health services, food services, housing-related support, and transportation assistance. Establishing an integrated graduate student assistance desk may help students access available services, referrals, and support mechanisms in a more coordinated and student-centered manner.

Thirdly, information dissemination on student services should be improved through a centralized online information system. This platform may provide updated information on admission procedures, scholarship opportunities, health services, counseling schedules, alumni activities, co-curricular programs, and other support services. Improving communication channels may increase students' awareness and utilization of available services.

Fourthly, guidance programs and services should be further enhanced by expanding counseling outreach, career guidance, placement services, follow-up mechanisms, wellness activities, stress management sessions, and study skills workshops. Since many graduate students balance academic, professional, family, and personal responsibilities, guidance services should be flexible, accessible, and responsive to their needs.

Fifthly, alumni services should be strengthened through an updated graduate alumni database, alumni mentoring program, professional networking activities, alumni-led career talks, and research or professional development linkages. Stronger alumni engagement may provide graduate students with additional support for career development, professional growth, and institutional participation.

Sixthly, the organization and administration of student services should be reviewed regularly, particularly in terms of staffing, facilities, equipment, budget allocation, coordination, and service delivery processes. Regular coordination among offices involved in student services may help ensure more efficient, responsive, and sustainable implementation of student support programs.

Finally, the university should explore partnerships with local government units, community organizations, alumni groups, health providers, transport groups, and other stakeholders. Such partnerships may expand institutional resources for financial assistance, health services, housing support, transportation, and other

welfare-related needs of graduate students. Finally, future studies should address the limitations of the present study by using broader and deeper research designs. Since this study was conducted in one Philippine state university and relied on descriptive survey data, future researchers may conduct comparative studies across institutions or use mixed-methods designs involving interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis.

Future research may also examine the relationship between graduate student services and student satisfaction, engagement, retention, academic performance, and completion. Particular attention may be given to student assistance services, as this dimension emerged as the priority area for improvement in the present study.

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