

Frontline Service Performance of State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) in CALABARZON, Philippines: Basis for the Development of Frontline Service Performance Maturity Framework (SUC-FSPMF)

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the frontline service performance of selected State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) in CALABARZON, Philippines, as a basis for frontline service reform in public higher education. Guided by the principles of New Public Management, Republic Act No. 11032, and the Frontline Institutional Delivery Effectiveness System (FIDES) Framework, the study evaluated frontline service quality in terms of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. The quantitative phase involved 382 student respondents from four SUCs selected through proportionate stratified random sampling. Data were collected using an adapted frontline service performance questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive and inferential

statistics. The qualitative phase consisted of Key Informant Interviews with eleven frontline personnel from the Registrar's and Cashier's Offices, with data analyzed through In Vivo Coding. Findings indicated that the participating SUCs generally demonstrated high levels of frontline service performance across all dimensions. However, operational challenges persisted, including inadequate seating capacity, lengthy queues, delayed responses to online inquiries, internet connectivity issues, records management concerns, limited personnel, and space constraints. Significant differences in service performance were observed across SUCs and selected demographic variables, particularly age and frequency of office visits, while no significant differences were found according to year level, gender, purpose of visit, or mode of transaction. Qualitative findings emphasized the importance of process efficiency, digital integration, effective communication, and client-centered service delivery. Based on these findings, the study developed the SUC Frontline Service Performance Maturity Framework (SUC-FSPMF) to support the assessment, benchmarking, and continuous improvement of frontline services in public higher education institutions.

Keywords: *frontline service performance, State Universities and Colleges (SUCs), Public Higher Education, Republic Act No. 11032, FIDES Framework, Service Quality,*

INTRODUCTION

The quality of frontline services has become an important indicator of institutional effectiveness in higher education. Beyond academic instruction, research productivity, and community engagement, universities are increasingly expected to provide accessible, efficient, transparent, and client-centered administrative services that contribute to the overall student experience. The quality-of-service delivery influences client satisfaction and

provides institutions with an important basis for assessing organizational performance and identifying opportunities for improvement (Gaytos et al., 2023; Dugenio-Nadela et al., 2023). Frontline offices, particularly Registrars' and Cashiers' Offices, serve as important points of interaction between higher education institutions and their stakeholders. Consequently, the quality of these interactions can influence students' perceptions of institutional effectiveness, administrative efficiency, and overall satisfaction with their educational experience (De Ramos & Briones, 2024; Asistores & Nemiño, 2025). The increasing emphasis on service quality reflects broader developments in public administration, particularly the emergence of New Public Management (NPM). NPM promotes the application of managerial practices, performance measurement, accountability mechanisms, responsiveness, and client-oriented approaches to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public institutions (Indahsari & Raharja, 2020). Unlike traditional models of public administration that primarily emphasize rules, procedures, and regulatory compliance, NPM places greater importance on measurable organizational outcomes, institutional efficiency, service quality, and client satisfaction. Within public higher education, these principles encourage institutions to move beyond procedural compliance toward continuous performance improvement and more responsive service delivery. Students and other institutional stakeholders are therefore increasingly recognized not merely as recipients of administrative services but as clients whose experiences provide important evidence for evaluating organizational performance and improving institutional processes.

In the Philippine context, efforts to improve government service delivery were strengthened through the enactment of Republic Act No. 9485, or the *Anti-Red Tape Act of 2007*, which sought to improve efficiency, transparency, and accountability by simplifying government procedures and reducing bureaucratic delays (Republic of the Philippines, 2007). These reforms were expanded through Republic Act No. 11032, or the *Ease of Doing Business and Efficient Government Service Delivery Act of 2018*. The law strengthened existing mechanisms for public service reform by requiring government institutions to establish Citizen's Charters, standardize processing procedures, prescribe transaction processing times, strengthen accountability mechanisms, and implement measures intended to reduce opportunities for unnecessary bureaucratic intervention (Republic of the Philippines, 2018; Anti-Red Tape Authority, 2024). These requirements also apply to State Universities and Colleges (SUCs), which perform administrative and regulatory functions as public institutions and are expected to provide transparent, efficient, and client-centered frontline services.

Although Republic Act No. 11032 establishes common service standards across government institutions, regulatory compliance alone does not necessarily ensure uniform service experiences. Differences in organizational resources, institutional leadership, technological infrastructure, personnel capacity, service processes, and local administrative practices can influence how national service standards are implemented at the institutional level. Technology integration and administrative systems, in particular, have become increasingly important in strengthening service efficiency and supporting the delivery of accessible services in higher education institutions (Cruz & Mercado, 2023). The continuing financial, organizational, and operational challenges experienced by Philippine SUCs further demonstrate that public higher education institutions operate under varying institutional conditions that may affect their capacity to deliver consistently high-quality services (Flores, 2025). Evaluating frontline service performance is therefore necessary not only to determine compliance with government requirements but also to identify differences in institutional capabilities and opportunities for service improvement.

Service quality frameworks provide a systematic approach for evaluating how clients experience institutional services. Among the most influential frameworks is the SERVQUAL model, which conceptualizes service quality through five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. These dimensions examine the physical conditions surrounding service delivery, the consistency and dependability of services, the promptness of assistance, the competence and professionalism demonstrated by personnel, and the capacity of service providers to respond to individual client needs. Service quality research has demonstrated that these dimensions are important determinants of client satisfaction and organizational performance across different service environments (Culiberg, 2010; Dugenio-Nadela et al., 2023).

The SERVPERF approach further emphasizes clients' evaluations of actual service performance and provides a performance-based perspective for assessing service quality. Within higher education, service quality assessments have been used to examine students' experiences and determine how institutional services influence satisfaction and perceptions of organizational effectiveness. Existing research indicates that the quality of administrative services, including employee responsiveness, reliability, assurance, empathy, and the physical conditions of service environments, contributes to students' evaluations of institutional performance (De Ramos & Briones, 2024; Asistores & Nemiño, 2025). Consistency in service processes is particularly important because predictable and standardized procedures can reduce variations in client experiences and strengthen perceptions of fairness, reliability, and institutional credibility.

However, much of the existing literature on service quality in higher education focuses on overall student satisfaction, instructional services, or individual dimensions of service quality. Comparatively less attention has been given to the performance of administrative frontline services in public higher education institutions, particularly within Philippine SUCs. Furthermore, studies that rely exclusively on quantitative service assessments may identify differences in service performance without sufficiently explaining the institutional conditions and operational experiences underlying these findings. The perspectives of frontline personnel are especially important because they can provide contextual evidence regarding service procedures, resource limitations, technological constraints, records management, client volume, and other organizational factors affecting service delivery. The need for a more comprehensive assessment is particularly relevant among SUCs in CALABARZON. The region contains several public higher education institutions that operate within the same national regulatory environment but differ in institutional size, organizational resources, administrative systems, technological capabilities, and service delivery practices. While national policies such as Republic Act No. 11032 promote standardized and predictable service delivery, differences in institutional systems and operational processes may continue to influence clients' experiences of frontline services. Research on standardized service delivery suggests that established procedures can contribute to more consistent client experiences, while organizational processes, staff competencies, communication systems, and service design remain critical determinants of actual service performance (Ngo, 2025).

This study addresses these gaps by examining frontline service performance among selected SUCs in CALABARZON through an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. The quantitative phase assessed students' perceptions of frontline service performance across the dimensions of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy and examined whether these assessments differed according to institutional and respondent characteristics. The qualitative phase subsequently explored the experiences and perspectives of frontline personnel to explain the quantitative findings and identify operational challenges affecting service delivery. The integration of both forms of evidence provided a more comprehensive understanding of frontline service performance than could be obtained through a single methodological approach.

The study was guided by the principles of New Public Management, Republic Act No. 11032, and the Frontline Institutional Delivery Effectiveness System (FIDES) Framework, which organizes the assessment of frontline service performance around the institutional conditions and service quality dimensions relevant to public higher education. Through this integrated perspective, frontline service quality is understood not merely as the outcome of individual employee performance but as a product of institutional systems, operational processes, technological capacity, physical resources, communication mechanisms, and client-centered practices. Beyond assessing existing service conditions, the study develops the SUC Frontline Service Performance Maturity Framework (SUC-FSPMF) as its principal developmental contribution. The framework translates the empirical findings into a structured approach for assessing institutional service capabilities, identifying performance gaps, benchmarking frontline service performance, prioritizing improvement initiatives, and promoting continuous institutional development. Rather than treating service quality assessment as a one-time measurement exercise, the SUC-FSPMF positions frontline service improvement as a progressive institutional process that requires continuous evaluation, evidence-based intervention, monitoring, and organizational learning.

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METHODS

Research Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to assess the frontline service performance of selected State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) in CALABARZON, Philippines. The quantitative phase was conducted first to determine the level of frontline service performance and identify significant differences in respondents' assessments. This was followed by a qualitative phase consisting of Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) to provide contextual explanations and enrich the interpretation of the quantitative findings. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data enabled a more comprehensive understanding of frontline service performance and the operational factors influencing service delivery.

Research Locale

The study was conducted in four State Universities and Colleges in the CALABARZON Region, these SUCs were coded as SUC1 to SUC4 to avoid comparison and other possible negative impact on each SUC. These institutions were selected because they represent major public higher education institutions within the region and operate under the service delivery standards prescribed by Republic Act No. 11032. The quantitative phase involved 382 student respondents selected through proportionate stratified random sampling to ensure adequate representation from each participating institution. The sample size was determined using Cochran's formula with finite population correction. The qualitative phase included 11 frontline personnel from the Registrar's and Cashier's Offices who were purposively selected based on their direct involvement in frontline service delivery and their ability to provide insights into institutional practices and operational challenges.

Participants and Sampling Technique

The quantitative participants consisted of students officially enrolled in the selected State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) in the CALABARZON Region during Academic Year 2025–2026, regardless of year level, gender, or academic program, as they are the primary recipients of frontline services. A total of 382 respondents were determined using Cochran's Formula with finite population correction and selected through proportionate stratified random sampling based on each institution's student population, followed by simple random sampling within each SUC to ensure equal chances of selection. The sample included 177 respondents from SUC1, 81 from SUC2, 73 from SUC4, and 51 from the SUC3. For the qualitative phase, eleven (11) key informants were purposively selected from the Registrar's and Cashier's Offices of the participating SUCs because of their direct involvement in frontline service delivery. Eligible informants were permanent or regularly assigned personnel with at least one year of frontline service experience and sufficient knowledge of institutional procedures. The combined use of probability sampling for the quantitative phase and purposive sampling for the qualitative phase

ensured both representative quantitative data and rich, experience-based qualitative insights regarding frontline service performance.

Research Instrument

The study utilized a researcher-developed survey questionnaire consisting of three sections: the preliminaries (researcher's letter, data privacy notice, and ethical statement), the respondents' demographic profile, and the assessment of frontline service performance in selected State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) in CALABARZON. The assessment section was adapted from the SERVPERF Model and integrated with the core functions of the Anti-Red Tape Authority (ARTA), measuring the dimensions of tangible elements, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy through 75 statements rated using a 4-point Likert scale. The instrument was designed to measure students' actual service experiences and identify service performance gaps across the five dimensions. For the qualitative phase, a semi-structured interview guide anchored on the FIDES dimensions and ARTA service principles was developed to gather in-depth insights from key informants through open-ended and probing questions. The questionnaire underwent expert validation and pilot testing among respondents with characteristics similar to the target population, after which its internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. Following validation, the research instrument was submitted to the University Research Ethics Committee for ethical clearance. Upon approval, the researcher secured permission from the participating SUCs before administering the survey and conducting the key informant interviews.

Data Gathering

The study commenced after obtaining ethical clearance from the University Research Ethics Committee and securing permission from the participating State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) in CALABARZON. Student respondents were selected using probability proportional to size (PPS) sampling, and data were collected through a Google Forms survey distributed via a link and QR code with the assistance of student councils, faculty members, deans, and official social media platforms of the participating SUCs. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses in accordance with ethical research standards. Following the quantitative phase, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with purposively selected personnel from the Registrar's and Cashier's Offices to explain, validate, and enrich the survey findings. Interview data were analyzed using In Vivo coding, wherein themes were developed from the participants' own words to preserve the authenticity of their experiences and perspectives. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings through methodological triangulation provided a more comprehensive understanding of frontline service performance and strengthened the validity and credibility of the study. Finally, the collected data were organized, tabulated, analyzed, and interpreted using appropriate statistical and qualitative analysis techniques.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, weighted mean, and standard deviation, were used to summarize respondents' demographic characteristics and assess the level of frontline service performance across the five service quality dimensions. Inferential statistical techniques were employed to examine differences in respondents' assessments according to demographic characteristics. Depending on the assumptions of the data, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), Welch's ANOVA, Kruskal–Wallis, and Mann–Whitney U tests were performed. Statistical significance was evaluated at the 0.05 level. When multiple comparisons were required, Bonferroni correction was applied to control the family-wise error rate. Qualitative data were analyzed using In Vivo Coding, allowing participants' own words to serve as initial codes. Similar codes were subsequently grouped into categories and broader themes that explained operational issues, contextualized quantitative findings, and informed the development of recommendations for frontline service improvement.

Ethical Consideration

The study received ethical clearance from the University's Research Ethics Committee before data collection commenced. Institutional permissions were secured from the participating SUCs, and all respondents voluntarily participated after providing informed consent. Participants were informed of the study's objectives, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures implemented to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Data were securely stored and used exclusively for research purposes in accordance with established ethical standards governing research involving human participants.

Table 1. *Overall Assessment of the Frontline Service Performance of Selected SUCs in CALABARZON*

Dimension	Mean	SD	Verbal Interpretation
Tangible Elements	3.26	0.424	Strongly Agree
Reliability	3.25	0.427	Agree
Responsiveness	3.18	0.445	Agree
Assurance	3.26	0.44	Strongly Agree
Empathy	3.19	0.447	Agree
Overall Weghted Mean	3.23	0.437	Agree

Legend: 3.26–4.00 – Strongly Agree; 2.50–3.25 – Agree; 1.76–2.50 –Disagree; and 1.00–1.75 – Strongly Disagree

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Frontline Service Performance

Overall, respondents positively evaluated the frontline services provided by the participating SUCs across all five service quality dimensions. Tangibles and Assurance received the highest overall mean scores (both $M = 3.26$), followed by Reliability ($M = 3.25$), Empathy ($M = 3.21$), and Responsiveness ($M = 3.18$). These findings indicate that the participating SUCs generally demonstrate favorable frontline service performance while maintaining relatively comparable evaluations across the five dimensions. The favorable assessment across all dimensions is consistent with the service quality perspective that clients evaluate institutional services based on their actual service encounters involving the physical service environment, dependability of processes, responsiveness of personnel, competence and professionalism of employees, and individualized attention provided to clients (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Parasuraman et al., 1988). Previous research in higher education similarly demonstrates that these dimensions contribute to students' perceptions of institutional service quality and satisfaction (Dugenio-Nadela et al., 2023; De Ramos & Briones, 2024; Ngo et al., 2025).

Although all dimensions received favorable assessments, Responsiveness obtained the lowest overall mean. This finding indicates relatively greater opportunities for improvement in timely communication, prompt service delivery, and the capacity of frontline offices to respond efficiently to client inquiries and requests. The result is consistent with previous research demonstrating that responsiveness remains an important determinant of students' service experiences because delays in assistance, communication, and transaction processing can influence overall perceptions of institutional service quality (Onyango & Mutua, 2023; Ngo et al., 2025).

Analysis of individual indicators revealed specific operational concerns despite the generally favorable performance ratings. Comparatively lower assessments were observed in the sufficiency of seating in waiting areas, organization of queuing systems, visibility of queue indicators, transaction flow, and timeliness of responses to online inquiries. These findings demonstrate that positive overall service performance does not eliminate operational weaknesses within specific areas of frontline service delivery. The physical conditions surrounding service delivery can affect clients' perceptions of accessibility, convenience, and organizational efficiency, particularly when limitations in waiting areas, seating capacity, and queue management affect the overall service experience (Mendoza & Lopez, 2023). Likewise, effective digital communication and technology-enabled administrative systems have become increasingly important in maintaining timely, accessible, and responsive services within higher education institutions (Cruz & Mercado, 2023; Ngo et al., 2025).

Respondent Characteristics

A total of 382 students from four State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) in the CALABARZON Region participated in the quantitative phase of the study. Respondents represented SUC1 (46.34%), SUC2 (21.20%), SUC4 (19.11%), and SUC3 (13.35%). Most respondents were second-year students (47.60%), female (62.00%), and predominantly 19 to 20 years of age. More than half (53.10%) conducted their transactions through face-to-face services, while 37.40% utilized both face-to-face and online transactions. These characteristics demonstrate the diversity of students represented in the study and provide contextual information for interpreting their assessments of frontline service performance. The predominance of face-to-face and blended transactions also reflects the continuing importance of maintaining multiple service delivery channels within higher education institutions. The capacity of institutions to provide consistent services across traditional and digital platforms has become increasingly important as universities integrate technology-enabled administrative processes while continuing to accommodate clients who rely on conventional frontline services (Cruz & Mercado, 2023; Ngo et al., 2025).

Differences in Frontline Service Performance

Inferential analyses demonstrated statistically significant differences in respondents' assessments across all five service quality dimensions when grouped according to their respective SUCs. These findings indicate that meaningful variations remain in the implementation and delivery of frontline services despite the participating institutions operating within the same public higher education and regulatory environment. The institutional differences suggest that standardized national policies do not necessarily produce identical service experiences because organizational resources, administrative processes, technological capabilities, staff competencies, and institutional practices may influence actual service delivery. This supports the broader public service management perspective that organizational capacity and institutional systems influence how service standards are translated into operational performance (Indahsari & Raharja, 2020; Milakovich, 2012). In contrast, no significant differences were observed when respondents were grouped according to year level, gender, purpose of visit, or mode of transaction. These findings indicate that perceptions of frontline service quality were generally consistent across these respondent characteristics. The absence of significant differences according to mode of transaction is particularly relevant because it suggests that the participating SUCs maintained relatively comparable service experiences across face-to-face, online, and blended service channels. Consistent service experiences across different modes of delivery are important in ensuring accessibility, continuity, and equitable service provision as higher education institutions increasingly integrate traditional and technology-enabled administrative services (Cruz & Mercado, 2023; Ngo et al., 2025).

Significant differences were identified in selected service dimensions when respondents were grouped according to age and frequency of office visits. Age significantly differentiated assessments of Tangibles and Reliability, while frequency of visits significantly differentiated Tangibles and Assurance. These findings suggest that repeated exposure to frontline services and differences in client experiences may influence perceptions of particular aspects of service delivery. Frequent clients may have greater opportunities to observe the consistency of physical facilities, queue management practices, staff competence, and professional conduct across multiple service encounters. This interpretation is consistent with the study cited in the dissertation indicating that repeated engagement with service environments may enable clients to develop more comprehensive assessments of service quality and become increasingly sensitive to both improvements and operational deficiencies (Seitova, 2024).

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings complemented and provided contextual explanations for the quantitative results by identifying institutional and operational factors affecting frontline service delivery. Frontline personnel identified limited office space, inadequate seating capacity, increasing records storage requirements, internet connectivity interruptions, personnel limitations, and high client volume during peak periods as recurring challenges affecting frontline operations. These findings demonstrate that frontline service performance is influenced not only by employee behavior but also by the organizational systems, physical resources,

technological infrastructure, and workforce capacity supporting service delivery. The importance of institutional capacity and technology-enabled administrative processes is consistent with previous research emphasizing that digital governance, infrastructure, and organizational systems can strengthen public service efficiency and accessibility (Milakovich, 2012; Cruz & Mercado, 2023).

The qualitative findings also revealed the importance of standardized procedures, effective communication, digital integration, and process efficiency in maintaining service quality. Frontline personnel described the use of telephone communication, email systems, social media advisories, online coordination mechanisms, and face-to-face interactions to respond to clients. However, the effectiveness and consistency of these mechanisms varied according to staffing capacity, institutional practices, and the availability of personnel assigned to digital communication channels. These findings support previous research emphasizing that responsive higher education services require the integration of efficient systems, standardized communication mechanisms, technological capability, and employee competence (Ngo et al., 2025).

Summary of Findings

The quantitative and qualitative findings consistently indicate that the participating SUCs generally provide satisfactory to high-quality frontline services. The convergence of both datasets demonstrates that favorable student assessments coexist with operational constraints involving physical facilities, queue management, digital communication, technological infrastructure, records management, and workforce capacity. The institutional differences identified in the quantitative analysis and the operational challenges revealed by frontline personnel demonstrate that improving service quality requires both institution-specific interventions and broader strategies for continuous organizational improvement. The findings support the need to strengthen physical facilities, digital service infrastructure, communication systems, queue management, staff capability, and resource allocation to achieve more consistent and client-centered frontline service delivery. These findings are consistent with the principles of New Public Management, which emphasize performance measurement, organizational efficiency, responsiveness, accountability, and continuous improvement in public service delivery (Indahsari & Raharja, 2020). They also reinforce the objectives of Republic Act No. 11032 by demonstrating the importance of moving beyond procedural compliance toward the continuous assessment and improvement of actual service performance.

Taken together, the findings provide the empirical basis for the development of the SUC Frontline Service Performance Maturity Framework (SUC-FSPMF). The framework responds to the observed institutional differences and operational constraints by providing a structured approach for assessing service capabilities, identifying performance gaps, prioritizing interventions, benchmarking institutional practices, and promoting continuous improvement in frontline service delivery among State Universities and Colleges.

Frontline Service Performance in Public Higher Education

The findings demonstrate that the participating State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) generally provide favorable frontline services, as reflected in the positive assessments across the five service quality dimensions of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. The results are consistent with previous studies demonstrating that the quality of services provided by higher education institutions influences students' satisfaction and their broader perceptions of institutional effectiveness (Dugenio-Nadela et al., 2023; De Ramos & Briones, 2024; Ngo et al., 2025). From the performance-based perspective of service quality, the favorable assessments further indicate that students' actual experiences with frontline offices were generally positive across the physical, procedural, interpersonal, and responsiveness-related aspects of service delivery (Cronin & Taylor, 1992).

The favorable performance across the five dimensions also suggests that the participating institutions have substantially aligned their frontline operations with the principles of Republic Act No. 11032, particularly those concerning transparency, accountability, efficiency, standardization, and client-centered public service delivery. The implementation of Citizen's Charters, prescribed service procedures, processing standards, and accountability mechanisms provides an institutional foundation for promoting predictable and transparent service experiences

(Republic of the Philippines, 2018; Anti-Red Tape Authority, 2024). However, the results should not be interpreted as demonstrating complete or uniform compliance with the law. Rather, the generally favorable evaluations indicate that the institutionalization of standardized procedures and public service requirements may have contributed to positive service experiences while opportunities for further improvement remain.

Among the five dimensions, Assurance and Tangibles received the highest overall assessments. The favorable rating for Assurance indicates that students generally perceived frontline personnel as knowledgeable, professional, courteous, and capable of providing confidence in the accuracy and security of their transactions. Previous research has demonstrated that employee competence, professionalism, assurance, empathy, and responsiveness are important determinants of students' perceptions of service quality and institutional effectiveness (De Ramos & Briones, 2024; Ngo et al., 2025). The result also supports the service quality framework of Parasuraman et al. (1988), which identifies employee knowledge, courtesy, credibility, and the ability to inspire trust and confidence as central components of Assurance.

The favorable assessment of Tangibles indicates that respondents generally recognized the adequacy of physical facilities, signage, service resources, equipment, and other visible aspects of the frontline service environment. Physical service conditions can shape clients' perceptions of organizational readiness, accessibility, convenience, and service quality, particularly because the service environment constitutes one of the most immediate and observable aspects of the client experience (Mendoza & Lopez, 2023). Nevertheless, lower assessments involving seating sufficiency, queue management, and transaction flow indicate that favorable overall perceptions of Tangibles coexist with specific limitations in physical capacity and client-flow management.

Conversely, Responsiveness obtained the lowest overall mean among the five service quality dimensions. Although respondents still evaluated this dimension favorably, the result suggests that timely communication, prompt assistance, response to online inquiries, and efficient transaction processing remain comparatively greater challenges for the participating institutions. This finding is consistent with Onyango and Mutua (2023), who emphasized the importance of responsiveness in shaping student satisfaction within university service environments. Similarly, Ngo et al. (2025) highlighted the importance of responsive institutional services in influencing students' satisfaction and broader evaluations of university service quality.

The comparatively lower assessment of Responsiveness may be explained by the operational conditions identified during the qualitative phase. High client volume, staffing limitations, internet connectivity interruptions, and differences in the management of communication channels may restrict the ability of frontline offices to maintain prompt and continuous assistance across face-to-face and digital service platforms. Technology-enabled services can strengthen administrative efficiency and accessibility, but their effectiveness depends on adequate technological infrastructure, institutional processes, and organizational capacity (Cruz & Mercado, 2023; Milakovich, 2012). Thus, improving Responsiveness requires not only greater effort from frontline personnel but also institutional investments in communication systems, workforce capacity, technological infrastructure, and service process improvement.

Institutional Differences and Service Consistency

Despite operating within the same national policy and regulatory environment, the participating SUCs exhibited statistically significant differences across all five dimensions of frontline service performance. The findings demonstrate that common regulatory requirements do not necessarily result in uniform service experiences across institutions. Republic Act No. 11032 establishes standardized requirements for transparency, processing procedures, service timelines, Citizen's Charters, and accountability in government service delivery; however, actual service performance remains dependent on the institutional systems through which these standards are implemented (Republic of the Philippines, 2018).

From the perspective of New Public Management, these institutional differences may reflect variations in organizational capacity, resource allocation, management practices, technological infrastructure, employee capabilities, and the effectiveness of internal performance systems. NPM emphasizes that improving public services requires attention to measurable performance, organizational efficiency, managerial capacity, accountability, and client-oriented outcomes rather than reliance on procedural compliance alone (Indahsari &

Raharja, 2020). The findings therefore suggest that the quality of frontline services is influenced by the capacity of individual institutions to translate regulatory standards into effective operational practices.

Variations in technological infrastructure and administrative systems may also contribute to institutional differences in frontline service performance. Technology integration can improve administrative efficiency, communication, accessibility, and service delivery; however, differences in technological capacity and implementation practices can produce uneven institutional outcomes (Cruz & Mercado, 2023). Likewise, the broader financial and organizational challenges affecting Philippine SUCs may influence their ability to invest consistently in physical facilities, digital infrastructure, workforce capacity, and administrative modernization (Flores, 2025). The significant institutional differences identified in the study therefore support the need for interventions that recognize institution-specific conditions rather than assuming that a uniform policy framework will automatically generate comparable service outcomes.

In contrast, no significant differences were observed when respondents were grouped according to year level, gender, purpose of visit, and mode of transaction. The consistency of assessments across these characteristics suggests that students generally experienced comparable levels of service quality regardless of their academic standing, gender, transaction purpose, or service channel. These findings may reflect the influence of standardized procedures, Citizen's Charters, verification mechanisms, and institutional guidelines that require frontline services to be delivered according to established processes rather than individual client characteristics (Republic of the Philippines, 2018).

The consistency of service assessments across most client groups is also compatible with the performance-based perspective of SERVPERF. Clients evaluate service quality based primarily on their actual service experiences, and consistent service processes may contribute to relatively stable perceptions across different categories of service users (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). In public institutions, the consistent application of service standards is particularly important because it supports fairness, predictability, transparency, and accountability in administrative transactions.

The absence of significant differences according to mode of transaction is particularly relevant to the increasing integration of digital and conventional services in higher education. Respondents using face-to-face, online, or combined service channels provided statistically comparable evaluations of frontline service performance. This suggests that the participating institutions were generally able to maintain continuity in service quality across multiple transaction channels. As higher education institutions expand technology-enabled services, the ability to provide consistent experiences across traditional and digital platforms becomes increasingly important for maintaining accessibility and client satisfaction (Cruz & Mercado, 2023; Ngo et al., 2025).

However, significant differences were observed in selected dimensions according to age and frequency of office visits. Age differentiated respondents' assessments of Tangibles and Reliability, while frequency of visits differentiated Tangibles and Assurance. These findings indicate that certain aspects of service performance may be evaluated differently depending on clients' characteristics and their degree of exposure to frontline operations. Clients who interact more frequently with frontline offices have greater opportunities to observe the physical service environment, the consistency of procedures, employee competence, and professional conduct across multiple service encounters.

From a performance-based service quality perspective, repeated interactions provide clients with a broader basis for evaluating actual service performance (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). Frequent users may therefore become more sensitive to variations in facilities, queue management, employee professionalism, process consistency, and other aspects of service delivery. Nevertheless, because significant differences were limited to selected dimensions, the overall results indicate that institutional conditions were a more consistent source of variation in service performance assessments than most individual respondent characteristics.

Operational Challenges Affecting Frontline Service Delivery

Although the overall assessment of frontline service performance was favorable, the qualitative findings identified operational constraints that continue to influence the consistency, accessibility, and efficiency of service delivery. Limited waiting areas, inadequate seating capacity, increasing records storage requirements, internet connectivity interruptions, personnel limitations, high client volume during peak periods, and differences in communication practices emerged as recurring challenges among the participating institutions.

The qualitative findings demonstrated clear convergence with the quantitative results. Lower assessments involving seating capacity, queue management, transaction flow, service consistency during peak periods, and timely responses to online inquiries corresponded with frontline personnel's accounts of restricted office space, high transaction volume, technological interruptions, limited personnel, and difficulties in sustaining communication across multiple service platforms. This convergence strengthens the interpretation that the comparatively lower quantitative indicators reflect identifiable institutional and operational conditions rather than isolated student perceptions.

Physical facilities and the organization of service environments remain important components of frontline service performance. Inadequate waiting areas, limited seating capacity, congestion, and poorly managed transaction flow can affect clients' perceptions of accessibility, convenience, and service efficiency (Mendoza & Lopez, 2023). The qualitative findings further demonstrated that records storage requirements contributed to space limitations, with some institutional areas being used simultaneously for operational, storage, and client service purposes. These conditions emphasize the importance of facility planning and records management as components of institutional service improvement.

Technological infrastructure also emerged as an important factor influencing service continuity and responsiveness. Internet connectivity interruptions affected technology-dependent transactions and occasionally required frontline offices to use manual procedures or alternative service mechanisms. Digital governance can strengthen public service efficiency, participation, accessibility, and organizational performance, but the effectiveness of technology-enabled services depends on reliable infrastructure, effective organizational processes, and institutional capacity to manage digital transformation (Milakovich, 2012). Similarly, the integration of technology within higher education administrative services requires appropriate infrastructure and institutional systems to translate digital initiatives into improvements in service efficiency (Cruz & Mercado, 2023).

The findings concerning delayed responses to online inquiries further demonstrate that the expansion of digital service channels creates additional organizational demands. Frontline offices used telephone calls, email, social media platforms, online communication systems, and face-to-face interactions to communicate with clients, but the consistency and timeliness of these mechanisms depended on staffing capacity and institutional communication practices. Higher education institutions seeking to strengthen service quality must therefore integrate technology-enabled systems with adequate personnel, standardized communication protocols, and organizational mechanisms for monitoring and responding to client concerns (Ngo et al., 2025).

Personnel limitations and high client volume during peak periods likewise affected frontline service operations. Employee competence and professionalism contributed to favorable assessments of Assurance; however, the qualitative findings demonstrate that individual employee capability cannot fully compensate for insufficient workforce capacity or rapidly increasing service demand. Maintaining quality service delivery therefore requires appropriate staffing arrangements, workload management, process improvement, employee development, and institutional mechanisms for responding to fluctuations in client volume.

These findings demonstrate that improving frontline service performance requires more than focusing on employee behavior. Service quality is produced through the interaction of physical facilities, human resources, technological infrastructure, administrative procedures, communication systems, leadership practices, and organizational capacity. This broader institutional perspective is consistent with NPM, which emphasizes organizational performance and managerial systems as central mechanisms for improving public service delivery (Indahsari & Raharja, 2020).

Implications for Public Administration and Higher Education

This study extends the application of service quality assessment within Philippine public higher education by integrating the performance-based perspective of SERVPERF, the public service delivery requirements of Republic Act No. 11032, New Public Management principles, and an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. SERVPERF emphasizes the measurement of clients' actual experiences of service performance (Cronin & Taylor, 1992), while NPM highlights efficiency, accountability, responsiveness, measurable outcomes, and client-oriented service delivery within public institutions (Indahsari & Raharja, 2020). Republic Act No. 11032 provides the national regulatory context for transparent, standardized, efficient, and accountable government services (Republic of the Philippines, 2018).

The integration of these perspectives enables frontline service performance to be understood as both a client experience and an institutional capability. Unlike assessments that focus exclusively on student satisfaction or quantitative service ratings, the present study combines students' evaluations of frontline services with qualitative evidence from the personnel responsible for delivering those services. The mixed-methods approach made it possible to identify not only the level and variation of service performance but also the physical, technological, organizational, and workforce conditions underlying the quantitative findings.

The findings have practical implications for SUC administrators and frontline service managers. First, the significant differences across institutions demonstrate the need for institution-specific assessments and improvement strategies. SUCs should periodically evaluate frontline service performance, identify dimension-specific weaknesses, and prioritize interventions according to their institutional conditions and available resources. Second, the comparatively lower assessment of Responsiveness highlights the need to strengthen response time, communication systems, digital service channels, and transaction processes. Third, the qualitative findings demonstrate the importance of investments in physical facilities, records management, technological infrastructure, staffing capacity, and workforce development.

The findings also demonstrate that compliance with Republic Act No. 11032 should be treated as a foundation for service improvement rather than the endpoint of institutional performance. Citizen's Charters, processing standards, accountability mechanisms, and standardized procedures establish minimum requirements for government service delivery, but sustained improvement requires continuous performance measurement, evidence-based interventions, organizational learning, and institutional adaptation (Republic of the Philippines, 2018; Indahsari & Raharja, 2020).

A major contribution of the study is therefore the development of the SUC Frontline Service Performance Maturity Framework (SUC-FSPMF). The framework translates the empirical findings into a developmental approach for assessing institutional service capabilities, identifying performance gaps, benchmarking service conditions, prioritizing interventions, and monitoring continuous improvement. Rather than limiting service quality assessment to determining whether clients are satisfied, the SUC-FSPMF recognizes that institutional service systems should progressively develop through systematic measurement, evidence-based decision-making, targeted improvement, and performance monitoring.

The maturity orientation of the framework extends the performance-based principles underlying SERVPERF by connecting the measurement of actual service experiences with institutional development and continuous improvement (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). It also supports the NPM emphasis on measurable performance, accountability, managerial capacity, and organizational improvement (Indahsari & Raharja, 2020). By incorporating the service delivery objectives of Republic Act No. 11032, the framework provides a mechanism through which SUCs can evaluate both service performance and the institutional conditions necessary to sustain transparent, responsive, efficient, and client-centered frontline operations (Republic of the Philippines, 2018).

The SUC-FSPMF also addresses the institutional differences identified in the study. Because the participating SUCs demonstrated statistically significant variations across all five service quality dimensions, a uniform intervention may not adequately respond to institution-specific strengths and weaknesses. The framework enables institutions to determine their current service capabilities, identify priority areas, develop targeted interventions, allocate resources strategically, and monitor improvement over time. This approach is particularly relevant in the Philippine public higher education sector, where differences in financial resources, technological

capacity, administrative systems, and organizational conditions can influence institutional performance (Flores, 2025; Cruz & Mercado, 2023).

Overall, the findings emphasize that sustaining favorable frontline service performance requires continuous organizational improvement rather than mere compliance with regulatory requirements. Addressing institutional disparities, strengthening digital capabilities, improving physical facilities and records management, enhancing workforce capacity, standardizing communication systems, and continuously evaluating service outcomes are essential for advancing public higher education service delivery. Through the SUC Frontline Service Performance Maturity Framework (SUC-FSPMF), the study provides an evidence-based mechanism for moving from the measurement of frontline service performance toward systematic institutional development and continuous improvement, thereby contributing to more responsive, efficient, accountable, technology-enabled, and client-centered public higher education services in the Philippines.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the participating State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) in CALABARZON generally demonstrate favorable frontline service performance across the dimensions of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. However, differences in service performance across institutions and persistent operational challenges involving physical facilities, queue management, digital communication, technological infrastructure, records management, and workforce capacity indicate that effective frontline service delivery requires continuous institutional improvement beyond compliance with Republic Act No. 11032.

The findings further demonstrate that institutional conditions and operational capabilities have greater implications for variations in frontline service performance than most respondent characteristics. While differences were identified across SUCs and selected dimensions according to age and frequency of office visits, assessments remained generally consistent across year level, gender, purpose of visit, and mode of transaction. This suggests that standardized service procedures contribute to relatively consistent service experiences across client groups, although institutional differences continue to influence the quality and efficiency of service delivery.

Based on these findings, the study developed the SUC Frontline Service Performance Maturity Framework (SUC-FSPMF) as a structured approach for assessing institutional service capabilities, identifying performance gaps, prioritizing improvement initiatives, and monitoring progress toward more advanced levels of frontline service delivery. The framework extends service quality assessment beyond the measurement of current performance by promoting systematic benchmarking, evidence-based intervention, and continuous institutional development.

Overall, strengthening frontline services in public higher education requires coordinated improvements in physical resources, digital infrastructure, workforce capability, administrative processes, communication systems, and performance monitoring. The application of the SUC-FSPMF provides SUCs with an evidence-based pathway for advancing more consistent, responsive, efficient, technology-enabled, and client-centered frontline services, thereby contributing to improved public service delivery and institutional effectiveness in Philippine public higher education.

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