

UNDERSTANDING THE TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF FIRST- YEAR STUDENTS OF DAVAO DEL SUR

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Abstract: In this phenomenological study, the researcher examines the changing circumstances of first-year college students in Davao Del Sur, Philippines, as they transition from high school to college or university. The researcher, in conducting semi-structured interviews, investigates participants' life experiences, coping mechanisms, and insights. The findings reveal that the students face challenges with academic expectations, personal adaptations, and social interactions highlighted the importance of support structures and financial stability. Two primary coping strategies, self-care, and emotional regulation, were identified. Additionally, goal orientation and utilization of university resources emerged as critical factors for student success. This study highlights regional differences in student experiences and provides recommendations for developing tailored support systems in the Davao Del Sur educational context.

Keywords: academic expectations, coping mechanisms, emotional regulation, experiences, goal orientation, transition.

I. INTRODUCTION

The transition from high school to college is challenging for some students. Preparedness required for a student to enroll in and complete a college program requiring no remediation is commonly known as being college-ready. Insights into the broader implications for educational advancement in the ASEAN region can be obtained from the experiences and challenges Senior High School (SHS) graduates in the Philippines encounter when transitioning to tertiary education. These experiences impact their readiness for college and adjustment to university life. The changeover from high school to college is a significant life event accompanied by various changes and challenges that can impact students' academic success and personal growth. Students navigate the academic, social, and emotional adjustments in their lives as they transition into this new stage of their educational journey. First-year students need to comprehend this transition as their experiences can significantly influence their success in higher education.

Recent studies have emphasized the complexity of the transition from high school to college, emphasizing its significance in shaping students' future academic and personal outcomes. According to Pascarella and Terenzini (2021), the success of a student's journey in higher education is predominantly determined by their first year at college. Students face various challenges during this period, including the need to adapt and cope with increased academic stress and social pressures associated with college (Torreses & Martinez, 2022). Lekena and Bayaga (2018) point out that many first-year students are not prepared for the shift, which can make it difficult to transfer from school to college. New tasks and responsibilities can

be overwhelming, leading to fear during the first year for many students. The causes of high attrition and its diversity are evident, but it is not fully understood. The study is aimed at understanding the causes of hardship during first-year transitions, which were also examined in this investigation.

Davao del Sur's distinct cultural, economic, and educational characteristics may contribute to the alterations in the region. Understanding the impact of regional factors on students' transition experiences is crucial for effective support, as stated by Reyes and Gutierrez (2023). The amount of research on the transition to college is growing, but there are few studies that examined how students in Davao Del Sur experience this transition, particularly from a historical perspective. Studies on the transition from high school to college have been conducted in Western settings or urban areas of the Philippines (Garcia & Weiss, 2022; Sanchez et al, 2019). Additionally, the studies conducted on the experiences of students in urban areas, such as Davao Del Sur where cultural and socioeconomic factors play a significant role in the transition process, are noticeably deficient.

This phenomenological research study has investigated the lived experiences of first-year college students in Davao Del Sur as they transition from high school to college. This study has examined the challenges faced by these students, how they handle them, and their attitudes towards the transfer process. The study has provided knowledge that can assist in the development of services and programs designed to aid students in this area. Also, many existing research studies employ a quantitative methodology, disregarding student experiences and favors quantifiable figures such as academic achievement and retention rates (Lopez & Castillo, 2023).

This study supplements the existing data on student transitions in postsecondary education, particularly in the Philippines. According to Cruz and Ramos (2021), the creation of effective support systems necessitates an awareness of local differences in student encounters. This study is beneficial for educators, administrators and politicians in enhancing student achievement and retention in Davao Del Sur. Furthermore, this study has filled a significant gap in the current literature by emphasizing the importance of responding to the unique needs and experiences of students in this area through their first-year experiences.

II. BODY OF ARTICLE

Research Objectives

The study explored and understood the transition experiences of first-year college students in Davao Del Sur as they moved from high school to college.

1. What are the lived experiences of first year students in Davao Del Sur during their transition from high school to college?
2. What coping mechanisms and strategies employed by first-year college students in Davao Del Sur in transitioning from high school to college?
3. What insights that you can give to those students who are struggling in their first year in the college?

Theoretical Framework

Using both basic ideas and modern viewpoints, this study has used an extended theoretical framework to analyze how first-year Davao Del Sur students move from high school to college. In Kuh's (2021) Conceptual Framework for Student Engagement, the importance of involvement in extracurricular and academic activities is emphasized as a critical component of student achievement, with a focus on the institutional policies that support engagement during transitions. The psychosocial theory of identity development proposed by Arnett (2021) has examined how emerging adults—including first-year college students—manage through the creation of their social and personal identities during this pivotal time of transition. Furthermore, Yosso's (2021) Cultural Transition Theory has also provided a culturally nuanced viewpoint by emphasizing the different types of cultural capital that students from different backgrounds bring with them and how those forms affect how well they adjust to college life. By merging modern theories with seminal frameworks like Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Schlossberg's Transition Theory, and Tinto's Theory of Student Departure, the study provides a comprehensive perspective on the transition from high school to college, particularly within Davao Del Sur's unique culture. It delivers a detailed understanding of how first-year college students in Davao Del Sur adapt to new academic and social environments through these combined theoretical lenses.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The lived experiences of first-year students as they transitioned from high school to college were explored through a qualitative research approach driven by phenomenological concepts. By emphasizing their subjective perceptions and perspectives on this important life event, the phenomenological approach is highly advantageous for this study as it captured the essence of student experiences (Cresswell& Poth, 2022). Additionally, phenomenology is a methodological approach that understood people experience and interpret their surroundings, with utmost importance placed on personal meaning and the essence of experiences (Van Manen, 2016).

Research Participants

A sample size of approximately 15-20 students from the AY 2024-2025 cohort was employed for data saturation and facilitated detailed analysis of individual experiences. The primary institutions involved were UM Bansalan (5), UM Digos (5), and Davao Del Sur State College (5), where first-year students participated in various programs, capturing diverse experiences. A purposive sampling method was utilized to gather responses from these students, who had recently transitioned from high school to college and provided valuable insights about their experiences (Palinkastes et al., 2015).

Data Analysis

The data analysis followed the procedures of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which consisted of the following stages (Smith et al., 2022). (1) Reading and re-reading, (2) Making initial notes, (3) Developing emerging themes, (4) Looking for connections between themes, (5) Developing superordinate themes, and (6) Integrating participant narratives. The research adhered to the ethical norms specified by the colleges. All participants were given informed consent on their awareness of the study’s objectives, their rights as participants, and safeguards their personal information. Participants had also the consensus to leave the study at any time.

Research Instruments

Data collection utilized semi-structured interviews. Kallio et al (2016) explained that this prominent technique in phenomenological research allowed participants to delve deeper into themes while permitting them to express their experiences in their own words. Interviews were done both in person and on video conference based on the participants’ availability. These participants shared about their academic challenges, social integration, and personal coping mechanisms in 20-30 minutes. Data from the interview were audio recorded, verbatim were transcribed, was analysed, and interpreted.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presented the information gathered in the study, which revolved around first-year students expressing difficulties in their transition from high school to college in Davao del Sur. Research confirmed that students' transition experiences are significantly influenced by their academic expectations, personal changes, and social connections. Lekena and Bayaga (2018) suggest being college-ready is a prerequisite to succeed without any remediation. While achieving the pre-college process, Abas and Bauyot (2024) has emphasized that Senior High School graduates needs to see challenges on the eye level so as they are better equip for higher education.

Table 1. Lived experiences of first-year college students in Davao Del Sur

Emergent Themes	Subthemes	Code
Personal Experience	Academic Expectations	Adjustment with the new curriculum and environment
		Academic workload
		Study habits
		Time management
Support System	Social Interactions	Moral support from family, siblings, relatives
		Belongingness in the group
		Making new friends
		Financial support

Personal Experience

One emerging subject arising from the findings in this analysis is “personal experiences”, which students may highlight their various responses. The new curriculum and atmosphere affect academic burden, study habits, and time management.

“As a first-year college student, I struggled or still struggling to adjust to the new curriculum and environment, making it hard for me to cope with the situation. I need time to fully adapt to this new condition, which is understandable.” (P8)

“As a first-year college student in Davao Del Sur, I face a challenging transition marked by increased academic workload, adapting to new teaching styles, and navigating a new social landscape. I experience feelings of isolation, uncertainty, and pressure to succeed while embracing newfound freedom and independence.”e (P14)

“The transition from my high school to college is quite difficult because there are a lot of adjustments including academic adjustments like time management and study habits. Social and emotional adjustments like new friendships and sense of independence.” (P6)

“Sometimes it's hard to manage my time.” (P2)

The research of Tesoro (2020) explains that the transition to college is characterized by a number of emotional, social, and intellectual adjustment challenges. The finding is also confirmed by Gerdes, H. et al (1994) that the emotional, social, and intellectual transition challenges associated with attending college are complex.

Support System

A big life milestone that may be both joyful and difficult is moving from high school to college. A robust support network can significantly impact students' ability to effectively transition from high school to college. During the move to college, moral support from family and close relatives is essential. This emotional support offers encouragement and a sense of safety. For first-generation college students, LeBoeuf and Dworkin (2021) emphasize the value of family support, showing that it can offer a multitude of resources that are sometimes disregarded in studies.

“They supported me not just emotionally and physically, but they also showed their support by helping or guiding me to make decisions about where I could attend college and what program to take.” (P13)

“Emotional support my parents, siblings, and other family members can provide emotional support, encouragement, and a listening ear during the challenges of adjusting to college life the advice and guidance.” (P16)

For students considering a transition to college, a sense of belongingness is crucial. Their sense of self and well-being is improved by feeling a part of a community.

“The kind of support I received from the school was truly time work, we work together to finish a project or even assignment helping one another is the school's best way to maintain our grades.” (P10)

Strayhorn (2019) states that a feeling of belongingness is related to positive outcomes, like more involvement and perseverance in college. College transition also means making new acquaintances. Friendships can improve academic engagement, lower stress levels, and offer emotional support. The finding of Picton, Kahu, & Nelson (2017) affirms that friendships made during a student's first year of college enhance their psychosocial experiences and academic performance.

However, financial capabilities also dishearten students. The high school to college shift requires financial aid.

“My first experience was being down a lot because I wasn't smart and didn't have money for tuition.” (P1)

“Being in college it's really important that you are financially stable.” (P3)

“As a student I am financially balancing expenses like tuition and daily needs and it can be stressful.” (P7)

Students have difficulty concentrating on their studies because of financial difficulties. Roksa and Kinsley (2018) investigate the depressing effects of family financial support on academic performance, especially for students from low-income families.

Table 2: Coping Mechanism and Strategies Employed

Emergent Themes	Subthemes	Code
Self-Care Practices	Mindfulness of Health	Taking care of self
		Celebrating small success
		Having a positive attitude
		Engage physical games
Emotional Regulation	Dealing with emotions	Frustrations in the class
		Experience nervousness

Table 2 discusses the students' coping mechanism and strategies, wherein two emergent themes identified: the Self-Care Practices and Emotional Regulation. In the Self-Care practices, mindfulness of health is identified as the subthemes where there are four codes that emerged: taking care of self, celebrating small success, having a positive attitude and engage physical games. Another emergent theme occurs, that is emotional regulation, wherein two codes existed: frustrations in the class and experience nervousness.

Self-Care Practices

Self-care entails taking proactive steps to support one's mental, emotional, and physical health. According to Gill Lopez and Sheehan (2021), self-care is crucial for preserving general health, particularly for students who are under stress from their studies. Essential components of self-care include regular exercise, a healthy diet, and enough sleep.

"I see that I have time to exercise and engage in physical games." (P7)

Besides, acknowledging and applauding little successes can increase motivation and self-worth. Small victories should be celebrated, since they can encourage positive behavior and promote a more positive outlook.

"Whether it is a small or big achievement, I consider it as success." (P1)

Then, keeping a positive outlook is essential for accentuate management and mental wellness. Hölzel et al. (2011) agreed on his finding that mindfulness exercises can support people in developing resilience and concentrating on their positive experiences.

"I overcome challenges by staying positive." (P3)

It is also supported by Czeisler et al. (2020) that thinking positively can help reduce stress and improve wellbeing. Students can overcome obstacles and have a balanced viewpoint by adopting an optimistic approach.

Emotional Regulation

As Breland (2021) put it that college students need to foster resilient emotions. This requires understanding that feelings, even negative ones, are transient and controllable. Students can manage stress and preserve emotional stability by creating strong support systems with friends, family, and mentors. As per Lipson et al. (2018), college students' use of mental health services escalated dramatically over the course of a decade, which suggests that anxiety-related issues have also increased. This increasing trend in the incidence of anxiety among college students may be caused by elements, including societal shifts, economic instability, and academic pressure.

"I feel nervous about the same time, about the hardness of college." (P5)

"I feel a mixture of excitement and nervousness in handling academic obstacles, adjusting to new social settings, and managing more independence." (P9)

"It's nervous but sometimes it's excited because of the new environment." (P10)

"Sometimes I cried because of the frustrations from my performances inside the class." (P12)

"I see to it that every weekend my family spends time with each other." (P12)

Table 3: Insights of struggling first-year college students

Emergent Themes	Subthemes	Code
GOAL ORIENTED	Career Aspirations	Focus on the goal
		Perseverance
		Striving for your dreams
UTILIZING CAMPUS RESOURCES	Student Life and Engagement	Using campus resources
		Seek support from campus resources

Adjustment is part of the student life encounters. Research has confirmed that freshman often experience emotional challenges such as homesickness and anxiety, in addition to academic expectations. The presence of academic advisers and counseling services at universities is a helpful tool in managing these stressors. The combination of being a part of class and mastering the art of time management leads to improved grades and personal growth. By participating in student clubs and activities, individuals develop a sense of support and belongingness through social interactions. Two emerging themes, namely Goal Oriented and Utilizing Campus Resources are the insights gained in their college journey to progress. The goal-oriented has three codes: focus on your goal, perseverance, and strive for your dreams. The emergent theme, utilizing campus resources has two codes, these are using and seeking support.

GOAL-ORIENTED

Establishing SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-bound) goal proposes an organized method of overcoming obstacles to first-year college students who are having difficulty adjusting to the new environment.

“Focus, the goal and always attend in the class and do not forget to thank to our God.” (P6)

“My goal is the only thing that pushes to overcome any challenges in my life.” (P3)

“My advice to students struggling in their first-year college is not given up and keep going to achieve their goal.” (P10)

Goal-oriented tactics, like setting specific academic and personal objectives, have been shown to improve academic performance and motivation. Students can plan out a path to success, monitor their progress, and maintain a focus on their priorities by establishing clear goals. Students can also overcome these obstacles and accomplish their objectives by requesting help from school resources like academic advisers and counseling services. This strategy emphasizes the value of organized planning and helps in promoting student achievement and is backed by research on goal-setting and motivation (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2002; Maricopa Community Colleges, 2023).

UTILIZING CAMPUSES RESOURCES

For struggling first-year college students, using campus services is essential. According to research, students who use support services like academic advising, tutoring, and mental health counseling are more likely to succeed academically and persevere.

“First-year college students should acknowledge their feelings, seek support from campus resources and professors, prioritize time management, practice self-care, and embrace learning and growth.” (P11)

“For first-year college students struggling with the transition, it’s important to seek support by reaching out to family, friends, and peers, and considering joining study groups. Use campus resources like academic advising, tutoring, and counseling services to help you succeed.” (P7)

“The resources that help me overcome the obstacle by expressing my self-using my hobbies in life.” (P13)

“The most helpful resources in overcoming that obstacle were the tutoring center for academic support and the study groups, which provided collaboration and diverse perspectives on the task.” (P15)

Maricopa Community Colleges (2023), for example, stresses how crucial it is for students to find and utilize school resources in order to overcome their academic and personal obstacles. However, O’Hara (2024) clarifies that students’ awareness of making use of these services greatly benefits their college experiences. With this, students get the support they need to thrive in their first year by encouraging them to use the library, interact with student life offices, and seek instructors for assistance during office hours.

V. CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, first-year college students in Davao Del Sur are confronted with significant challenges in their transition from high school to college, experiencing both academic and emotional adjustments. The study reveals that successful transition requires a two-pronged approach: maintaining goal-oriented mindsets and utilizing campus resources effectively. It is suggested that educational institutions provide comprehensive support networks that cover both intellectual and emotional needs. Students should be encouraged to develop SMART goals and actively engage with college services such as academic advising, tutoring, and counseling. Furthermore, institutions should offer region-specific programs that incorporate the distinct cultural setting of Davao del Sur.

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