

Prevalence of Stress, Stressors, and Coping Strategies of College Students: Basis for Guidance and Counseling Program

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ABSTRACT:

Tertiary education is widely recognized as a demanding environment, with the World Health Organization (2023) estimating that 20% of young adults globally experience mental health challenges, with students being particularly vulnerable. Excessive and prolonged stress negatively impacts physical and emotional well-being, lowers self-esteem, and hinders academic performance and personal growth. While existing studies identify common stressors, there is limited research examining how demographic diversity—specifically socioeconomic status and ethnicity—influences stress experiences and coping strategies in multi-cultural regions like Zamboanga City. This study was conducted to assess the prevalence of stress, identify primary stressors, and determine the coping strategies employed by college students at the Universidad de Zamboanga, serving as the basis for a proposed guidance and counseling program. Using a descriptive-quantitative research design, data were gathered from 1,357 students selected using Krejcie & Morgan's table, ensuring statistical adequacy. The adapted instruments achieved Cronbach's Alpha = 0.89, confirming high reliability, and underwent content validation by experts. Results revealed that most respondents were female (64.11%), from low-income households earning ₱10,000 or less monthly (40.31%), and predominantly belonging to the Tausug ethnic group (47.38%). Financial concerns ranked as the leading source of stress (41.19%), followed by academic pressures (31.54%), while relationship-related issues were the least cited. Stress across all domains was experienced at a moderately high level. The most common coping mechanisms were emotion-focused and culturally rooted, such as sharing problems with trusted individuals (53.13%) and engaging in prayer and reflection (50.18%). Significant differences were found in stress experiences and coping approaches based on gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity. A low but significant positive correlation ($r = 0.19$, $p < 0.001$) was observed, indicating that coping responses are activated by stress but are not always well-matched to the nature of the problem. Based on these

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findings, a comprehensive, culturally sensitive, and gender-responsive program is proposed to support student mental health and well-being.

Keywords: Stress, Stressors, Coping mechanisms, Guidance and Counseling Program, Descriptive-quantitative, Zamboanga City, Philippines

Introduction

Tertiary education is widely recognized as a demanding environment where students face various academic, social, and personal challenges. According to the World Health Organization (2023), approximately 20% of young adults globally experience mental health difficulties, with prevalence rising to 30% among university populations. Research consistently shows that prolonged or excessive stress is linked to poor physical health, emotional instability, low self-esteem, and reduced academic performance (Pascoe et al., 2024). Stress occurs when individuals perceive that the demands placed on them exceed their ability to cope, affecting their overall development and quality of life. While moderate stress can sometimes serve as motivation, high levels of unmanaged stress often lead to serious health issues and hinder personal and professional growth (Rice et al., 2025).

Recent studies show that stress among college students is rising due to heavier academic workloads, inflation and rising living costs, and the pressure to succeed in a competitive society (Chen et al., 2024). Common sources of stress today include financial difficulties, adjustment to campus life, relationship concerns, and worries about future employment. According to a study by Dela Cruz and Tungcul (2023), financial instability is the top concern for Filipino students, while academic pressure remains a close second. Furthermore, research highlights that the way students handle stress varies greatly depending on their background, culture, and personal resources. Many students rely on social support, religious practices, or positive thinking, while others turn to less effective habits such as

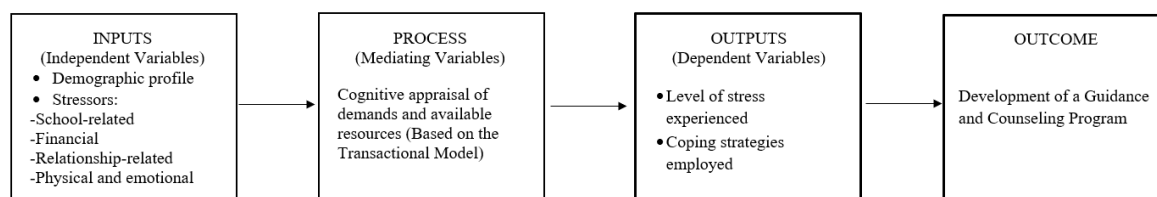
avoidance or substance use (Carver & Scheier, 2024).

Research Gap and Significance

Despite the growing body of literature, there is limited local data regarding the specific experiences of students in Zamboanga City, a region known for its rich cultural diversity. Previous studies often focus on general populations and do not address how cultural values, economic status, and social environment shape student experiences. Observations at the Universidad de Zamboanga indicate that many students struggle with low grades and absenteeism, likely linked to unmanaged stress, yet there is no clear program designed based on their actual needs. Additionally, while counseling services are available, many students do not use them due to stigma or lack of awareness, preferring informal support systems instead. This study fills the gap by providing recent, context-specific evidence on stress and coping in a multi-ethnic setting, offering insights that differ from studies conducted in more homogeneous regions.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is anchored on Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (1984, revised 2023). The theory posits that stress is not merely a stimulus or a response, but a dynamic interaction between the individual and their environment. It involves two key processes: cognitive appraisal (assessing whether a situation is threatening) and coping (efforts to manage demands perceived as exceeding resources).



The study is anchored on the Transactional Model, which explains how individuals respond to situations through a continuous interaction between internal and external factors. The framework follows an Inputs–Process–Outputs–Outcomes flow, showing the sequence and relationship of variables

Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to explore the prevalence of stress, identify common stressors, and determine the coping strategies employed by college students of Universidad de Zamboanga. Specifically, it seeks to achieve the following:

1. Describe the demographic profile of the respondents in terms of gender, socio-economic status, and ethnicity.
2. Identify the most common stressors experienced by the college students.
3. Determine the mean occurrence of stress experienced across four domains: School-Related, Money-Related, Relationship-Related, and Physical/Emotional-Related Stress.
4. Determine the common coping strategies practiced by the students.
5. Establish whether there is a significant difference in stress levels and coping

strategies when grouped according to demographic profile.

6. Examine the relationship between stressors, level of stress, and coping strategies.
7. Propose a Guidance and Counseling Program based on the findings.

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a descriptive-quantitative design, appropriate for describing the status of variables and testing relationships among them (Creswell & Creswell, 2024). It allows for systematic measurement and objective analysis of stress experiences and coping behaviors.

Population and Sample Size Justification

The target population consisted of 6,782 enrolled students. Sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table, which for a population of 7,000 yields a required sample of 364; however, to increase precision and allow for subgroup analysis, 1,357 students were selected, representing approximately 20% of the population. This size provides a 95% confidence level with a margin of error of less than 3%, ensuring statistical power. Simple random sampling was used to select participants across all colleges.

Table 1 Distribution of Respondents

College / Department	Total Population	Sample Size	Percentage
School of Education, Arts and Sciences	328	66	4.86%
College of Business Management	1,299	260	19.16%
School of Criminal Justice	1,019	204	15.03%

College / Department	Total Population	Sample Size	Percentage
School of Allied Medicine	2,565	513	37.80%
College of Information Technology	1,265	253	18.64%
Department of Civil Engineering	306	61	4.49%
Total	6,782	1,357	100%

Research Instrument

This study utilized two adapted research tools tailored to align with the study's objectives and local setting. The first was the Stress and Stressors Scale, adapted from the work of Barreca and Hepler (2000), with necessary modifications made to ensure relevance to the context of the respondents. This instrument comprises 20 items, all measured using a 5-point Likert scale to capture the extent of stress experienced and the sources of stress encountered by the participants. The second tool was the Coping Strategies Inventory, adapted from Carver and Scheier (2024), which includes 16 items designed to assess two distinct categories of coping approaches: problem-focused coping, which targets the root of the stressor, and emotion-focused coping, which addresses the feelings caused by stressful situations.

Validation and Reliability

To ensure the quality and appropriateness of the instruments, content validity was established through review by five qualified experts, including guidance counselors, psychologists, and statisticians. Their evaluation resulted in a Content Validity Index (CVI) of 0.92, which exceeds the widely accepted minimum threshold of 0.80, confirming that the items adequately represent the concepts being measured. Pilot testing was also carried out with 50 students who were not part of the final study sample to further refine the tools and check consistency. Reliability analysis produced a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.89, a value that indicates high internal consistency—meaning the

items within each scale consistently measure the same underlying construct.

Ethical Considerations

Strict adherence to ethical standards was observed throughout the research process. Formal approval was first obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee before any data collection activities began. All participants were provided with clear information about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential benefits and risks, after which written or verbal informed consent was secured. Respondents were assured that all personal information and their responses would remain strictly confidential and anonymous, with no identifying details disclosed in any part of the final report. It was also clearly communicated that participation was entirely voluntary, and that individuals could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or need for explanation.

Data Gathering Procedure

The data collection process began with the submission of a formal request to the university administration to seek permission to conduct the study and access the target respondents. Once approval was granted, the questionnaires were distributed to the participants during regular class hours to minimize disruption to academic activities. Research assistants provided clear instructions on how to complete the forms, explained the meaning of each section, and addressed any questions raised by the respondents to ensure full understanding of the items. Participants were reminded again that their answers would remain anonymous to encourage honest and unbiased

responses. All distributed questionnaires were returned completely filled out, resulting in a 100% retrieval rate.

Statistical Analysis

All collected data were processed and analyzed using the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 29. Descriptive statistics, including frequency counts, percentages, weighted means, and standard deviations, were computed to summarize the demographic profile of the respondents and provide an overview of their stress levels, stressors, and coping strategies. The Shapiro-

Wilk test was conducted to check the normality of data distribution, and the result showed a p-value greater than 0.05, confirming that the data followed a normal distribution and justifying the use of parametric statistical tests. For inferential analysis, the t-test and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were used to compare differences across groups, while Pearson's r was applied to examine relationships between variables. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d and eta-squared to measure the practical significance of the findings, and the threshold for statistical significance was set at an alpha level of 0.05 for all tests.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Profile

Table 2 Demographic Profile

Category	Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	487	35.89%
	Female	870	64.11%
Socio-Economic Status	≤ ₱10,000	547	40.31%
	₱10,001 – ₱15,000	276	20.34%
	₱15,001 – ₱20,000	188	13.85%
	₱20,001 – ₱25,000	207	15.25%
	₱25,001 – ₱30,000	60	4.42%
	≥ ₱30,001	79	5.82%
Ethnicity	Tausug	643	47.38%
	Bisaya	329	24.25%
	Zamboangueno/Chavacano	231	17.02%

Category	Classification	Frequency	Percentage
	Yakan	41	3.02%
	Others	113	8.33%

The profile reflects the university's enrollment trends and the socio-cultural context of Zamboanga City. These characteristics align with national data showing that female

enrollment in higher education exceeds male enrollment, and that a majority of Filipino college students come from low- to middle-income households (CHED, 2024).

Common Stressors

Table 3 Distribution of Stressors

Rank	Category	Frequency	Percentage
1	Money-Related Stress	559	41.19%
2	School-Related Stress	428	31.54%
3	Physical & Emotional Stress	236	17.39%
4	Relationship-Related Stress	134	9.87%

Financial concerns were the most cited stressor, consistent with recent studies in Southeast Asia which note that inflation and rising education costs have increased economic

pressure on students (Tran et al., 2025). Academic pressure followed, driven by the cultural view of education as the primary pathway to upward mobility (Tuason et al., 2024).

Level of Stress Occurrence

Table 4 Mean Level of Stress

Domain	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Physical & Emotional	2.84	0.62	Moderately High
School-Related	2.73	0.58	Moderately High
Money-Related	2.73	0.65	Moderately High
Relationship-Related	2.60	0.54	Moderately High

Scale: 1.00–1.79 = Never; 1.80–2.59 = Rarely; 2.60–3.39 = Sometimes; 3.40–4.19 = Frequently; 4.20–5.00 = Always

All domains were rated moderately high, confirming that stress is a regular experience. This supports the Transactional Model, as

demands exceed available resources for many students.

Coping Strategies

Table 5 Coping Strategies

No	Strategy	Frequency	Percentage	Type
1	Sharing with trusted person	721	53.13%	Emotion-Focused
2	Prayer & reflection	681	50.18%	Emotion-Focused / Spiritual
3	Positive thinking & breathing	584	43.04%	Problem-Focused
4	Socializing with friends	534	39.35%	Emotion-Focused
5	Entertainment / Relaxation	505	37.21%	Emotion-Focused
6	Consulting counselors	157	11.57%	Problem-Focused
7	Alcohol / Smoking	84	6.19%	Maladaptive

Discussion

The preference for emotion-focused and spiritual coping reflects **Filipino values of pakikipagkapwa and pananampalataya (Enriquez,

1994; updated by Dela Cruz, 2025). The low utilization of counseling services is consistent with findings in similar cultural contexts where mental health support is still stigmatized (Tan & Reyes, 2024).

Differences by Demographic Profile

Table 6 Test of Differences

Variable	p-value	Effect Size	Interpretation
Gender	< 0.001	0.21	Significant
Socio-Economic Status	< 0.001	0.28	Significant
Ethnicity	0.008	0.15	Significant

Males used more problem-solving strategies, while females relied more on social support. Lower-income students reported higher

financial stress and more spiritual coping. These differences highlight that "one-size-fits-all" interventions are unlikely to be effective.

Relationship Between Stressors and Coping

Table 7 Correlation Analysis

Variables	r-value	p-value	Interpretation
Stressors vs. Coping Strategies	0.189	< 0.001	Low Positive Correlation

Interpretation

While statistically significant, the low coefficient indicates that the relationship is weak in practical terms. This means students do adjust their coping when stress increases, but the strategies used are often not the most effective match for the problem. For example, praying or talking to friends may reduce anxiety but does not solve financial or academic problems. This finding is consistent with Wong (2024), who notes that mismatched coping strategies explain why stress persists even when coping efforts are high.

Proposed Guidance and Counseling Program

Program Name: Comprehensive Student Well-Being and Stress Management Program

Target Beneficiaries: All students, with special focus on freshmen, low-income, and high-risk groups.

Components:

1. Financial Literacy Hub: Seminars on budgeting, scholarship guidance, and work-study opportunities.
2. Academic Support Center: Peer tutoring, time management workshops, and study skills training.
3. Culturally Responsive Counseling: Integrating spiritual and family-oriented approaches into sessions.
4. Mental Health Awareness Campaign: To reduce stigma and promote help-seeking behavior.
5. Gender-Specific Groups: Separate sessions for males and females to address unique coping needs.

Expert Validation: The proposed program was reviewed by three guidance experts and two university administrators, who assessed it as feasible, relevant, and culturally appropriate, with an overall rating of 4.6/5.

Conclusions

College students experience moderately high levels of stress, driven primarily by financial and academic demands. Coping strategies are mostly positive but culturally oriented and often not directly addressing the root causes. Significant demographic differences exist, and the weak correlation between stress and coping indicates a need for better strategy matching.

Study Limitations

This study has several inherent limitations that should be noted when interpreting its results. In terms of scope, the research is confined to a single university, which means the findings may not be fully generalizable to other regions, academic institutions, or student populations with different characteristics. Regarding methodology, a cross-sectional research design was employed, which only captures a snapshot of students' stress levels and coping strategies at one specific point in time; as such, it cannot track or explain how these variables may shift or evolve over longer periods. Additionally, the study relies entirely on self-reported data from the participants, which introduces the possibility of response bias—including tendencies to answer in socially desirable ways or inaccurately recall personal experiences.

Practical and Policy Implications

The results of this research carry meaningful implications for different

stakeholders. For the university administration, there is a clear need to integrate mental health support services with existing financial aid programs and academic assistance initiatives to provide holistic care for students. For guidance counselors and mental health practitioners, interventions should be designed to build on the cultural strengths and coping resources already present in the local community, while also introducing practical problem-focused skills that students can apply to stressful situations. At the policy level, higher education institutions are encouraged to institutionalize sustainable mental health programs that are fully aligned with the provisions of the Philippine Mental Health Act of 2018, ensuring consistent and accessible support for all learners.

Future Research

To build on the findings of this study, several directions for further investigation are recommended. First, researchers may conduct longitudinal studies to observe and track changes in stress levels and coping strategies across different stages of the academic year. Second, the scope of inquiry should be expanded to include multiple universities across the Bangsamoro

Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) and other areas in Mindanao to enable broader and more representative comparisons. Finally, future studies could explore the relationship between stress, coping strategies, and academic performance by incorporating objective measures such as official grade records alongside self-reported data.

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