

Metamorphosis: Exploring the Challenges and Coping Mechanisms of High School Students Transitioning to College Life via Online Classes

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Abstract: *This study is a qualitative Phenomenological Research about the challenges that first-year college students face when transitioning from high school to college during the COVID-19 pandemic. As education is one of highest forms and standards for a person to achieve many students have doubts when they move to the next stage of their lives. Then the COVID-19 pandemic happened and greatly affected the education sector which moved and blended the classes online. The study will use a purposive sampling technique in selecting their respondents of the study, which are first-year college students. This study will use thematic coding in analyzing the data of the research. Based from the collected data, the researchers found out that first-year college students face different challenges in conducting online classes while also learning about the coping mechanisms that they do. The study presents eight themes from the respondents. We may safely conclude that freshmen college students still have difficulties in doing online classes and create new ways to manage online learning. Further guidance towards the students and support from the university including the faculty is recommended.*

Keywords— High School to College Students, Challenges and coping mechanisms, Online Classes, Qualitative Study

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, education is the key to almost everything. Our society has put education as one of highest forms and standards for a person to achieve. One starts from kindergarten, then moves up to grade school or middle school, then high school, then in some countries senior high school, then college.

College education is increasingly important, for individual economic prosperity and a higher quality of life and a college-educated workforce is a major component of national economic competitiveness [1]. The new period of first year college students lives also excites students who are transitioning from high school to college. They are, however, vulnerable to conditions and standards that put them at risk of psychological problems or that can worsen pre-existing issues [2].

Then, the COVID-19 pandemic happened. People did not anticipate this kind of event and pushed many to say inside their homes. The education sector had to make new ways in order to finish and continue the next school year. When transitioning to online courses, students expressed negative feelings such as uncertainty, anxiety and anxiousness while expressing that their professors used the Learning Management System very well and that they changed and blended to the new system [3]. From the faculty's perspective, they indicated that in contrast to face-to-face classes, the faculty found online education to result in more intellectual dishonesty, impersonal and

lack of feeling and difficult to handle in terms of technology [4]. Despite the faculty's efforts to render this method smooth, some variables are beyond its control, thereby neutralizing the drawbacks of time-consuming remote teaching [5]. Heavy workloads can have a negative impact on a student's mental health. The majority of students say that their only remaining responsibility is to think about the results moderately. Sequentially, students found that using computers and other devices was incredibly frustrating because they were not set up properly, hindering their development [6].

This study aims to provide context in the different challenges that students face when they transition from high school to college during the COVID-19 pandemic and how have they adapted to it. This study also aims to contribute to the field of this literature and as a guide for students and teachers to further improve and adjust to the new learning system.

2. RELATED WORKS

The freshman year is a daunting transition followed by significant changes in the educational atmosphere of students, such as unfamiliar learning activities, new social networks and intensified competition from academia. Academic achievement can be conceived as an on-going current issue in view of the imperatives of educational policies to increase the variety and number of students enrolling and succeeding at university. In order to cope with the increased number of freshmen

from diverse backgrounds joining universities, an in-depth understanding of achievement is therefore needed [7]. The overwhelming majority of high school students aspire to some kind of post-secondary education, but far too many of them enter college without awareness, skills or habits of mind of the basic material. They must succeed. For several factors, students are unprepared for postsecondary coursework, including discrepancies between what high schools teach and what colleges anticipate, as well as significant gaps between the teaching given by high schools with high levels of students in poverty and that offered by high schools with more advantaged students [8].

Many student, social, and institutional factors depend on a good transition from high school. "Students must build and nurture an identity during high school that develops from "high school student" to "graduate student" or "employee". They must be eager and capable of adapting to the culture of an academic or workplace and of learning and adhering to expectations that are unique to that culture. The dynamic mechanisms by which eligibility, financial assistance, and admissions are obtained for college or through which desired positions are obtained in the workplace need to be learned and navigated. They must be able to recognize and use financial, housing, tutoring, health, recreational and advisory services once out of high school, as required, and develop into their own academic and professional advocates. All of this must be accomplished while keeping in mind current priorities, desires, and abilities, and with an eye on possible career options and development. Being poorly equipped for any of these aspects makes the transition more complicated and reduces the chance that the student can successfully complete the transition [9]. One study says that students tend to use safe stress control strategies to cope with their sense of stress when they feel overwhelmed, the results also showed that students were found to use more positive strategies for dealing with stress than negative ones. There is no statistically relevant association between gender and both positive and negative stress coping strategies, an independent-sample t-test result showed [10].

Online learning skeptics raise questions about the consistency of coursework online. Some note that teachers frequently simply move their in-class pedagogy to an online format instead of designing teaching methods that would take advantage of the capabilities of computer-mediated distance education. Others say that there are also minimal student-teacher and student-student interactions. These practices can lead to low completion rates for online courses. Institutions harbor special concern about online course success among underprepared or historically underserved students, who

are already at risk for course withdrawal and failure. Online learning proponents, on the other hand, contend that improved technology education will lead to superior learning outcomes, and that higher online dropout rates are due not to the medium per se, but rather to the features of students choosing online courses. Advocates are also especially positive about the ability of completely online coursework to facilitate greater access to college by minimizing the cost and time of commuting and allowing students to study on a timetable that is suitable for them in the case of asynchronous approaches. Indeed, this objective of increased access is one of the key drivers of institutional decision-making in terms of growing offers of distance education [11]. Undergraduates in the first year face the difficulties of adapting to new learning standards while transitioning from secondary education to university education. Efforts should be oriented towards the promotion of online applications and new online teaching technologies. Facilitators should be qualified to use new technologies that can improve learners' comprehension [12].

In higher education institutions, the coronavirus pandemic has created changes in the teaching-learning process and has affected the relationship between teachers and students. As a consequence of the pandemic, universities were limited to conducting their activities solely online with students. In this respect, many governments have taken steps to prevent the spread of the virus and to ensure the continuity of the educational process, and online learning has been adopted by universities worldwide. Although internet-based learning is commonly considered an option, an alternative to conventional learning, it has become an important element for sustaining the activities of schools and universities during the Coronavirus pandemic. This shift in paradigm could generate shifts in the understanding of this form of teaching by students and their perception could be different from that observed in studies prior to the pandemic [13].

On the other hand, one study shows that because of the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of school closures followed in a very short period of time to enact social distancing steps, higher education is affected worldwide. Educational institutions, especially in the Philippines, face emerging challenges in their planning, implementation and evaluation systems. However, on a light note, the global pandemic opened up opportunities for the nation to update its delivery mode of education and to turn its focus to emerging technologies. Consequently, higher education institutions need to take the opportunity to enhance their evidence-based policies, offer accessible resources relevant to mental health, and make the curriculum responsive to the needs

of changing times [14]. Another study shows the level of preparation Filipino schools had for the COVID-19 pandemic, school officials should resolve the lack of digital skills among students and devise programs to train them. If the financial, operational and internet connectivity issues of learners in the low-income sector and rural areas are resolved, the future shift to e-learning should be considered. More strategy formulation and quality control processes, without compromising quality learning, should be geared towards fair and inclusive curriculum [15].

Moreover, any forms of pre-college intervention with local high schools may be one way to resolve the lack of preparedness of college freshman students with regard to classroom conduct, deadlines, note-taking, and learning a syllabus. In particular, this will include a visit by a college professor to the high schools who would approach the seniors with respect to college standards. It may also be a good way to accustom students to college by giving out a sample syllabus and going over the criteria for actions and deadlines, as well as describing the grading system and the different components that make up the final grade of the students [16].

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study's primary focus was to know the lived experiences of high school students transitioning into college via online and their coping mechanisms. The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What is it like being a first-year college student in the new normal?
2. What are the issues and problems encountered by the students?
3. What coping mechanisms do they imply in facing their issues and problem?
4. What do the respondents recommend in order to improve their status?

4. METHODOLOGY

Design

The research method employed in this study was a qualitative phenomenological design. Qualitative research involves exploring ideas in a naturalistic manner to uncover a phenomenon and obtain findings by means other than a statistical process [17].

A phenomenological design was selected for this study to gather data about the participants' authentic experiences of the phenomenon as it is subjectively experienced [18]. The goal of phenomenological research is to describe the "lived experiences" of a phenomenon.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the researchers will not be able to interview their respondents physically for safety protocols. Thus, the

researchers used online survey questions in data gathering.

Participants

The respondents of the study are freshman students who just took a big step of their lives and are currently attending their respective universities via online. They graduated last school year 2020 from Barcelona Academy, Marilao, Bulacan, Philippines.

The researchers used purposive sampling technique in selecting their respondents of the study. Purposive (also known as purposeful) sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources [19].

The six (6) participants of this study were selected on the basis of being a freshman student who graduated in 2020 and transitioned to higher education. They have undergone either asynchronous or synchronous online learning. To give a clearer picture of the participants, they must at least complete one (1) semester for the school year 2020-2021 to be able to give a sounder statement. All participants were over the age of 18, granted informed consent before participating in this study.

Student number 1 is a 19-year-old who is studying under the program of Bachelor of Science in Chemistry. Student number 2 is a 19-year-old under Bachelor of Science in Tourism Management. Student number 3 is an 18-year-old under the program in Bachelor of Science Psychology. Student number 4 is a 19-year-old student currently under the Bachelor of Science in International Travel and Tourism Management. Student number 5 is an 18-year-old under Bachelor of Science in Accountancy. And Student number 6 is an 18-year-old under the Bachelor of Science in Chemical Engineering.

Instruments

To obtain the data needed for this study, the researchers will use semi-structured questions to understand the perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of freshman students in transitioning to higher education. The use of semi-structured questioning can effectively elicit information on the life experiences and beliefs about the said topic. The researchers used researcher-made survey questions via Google Forms and will be sent to the selected interviewees. The researchers submitted the questions to their research advisor for validity and reliability.

This research focused on the experiences of the freshman students learning in an online-based environment and was guided by the following central question:

The guide questions were:

1. What is it like being a first-year college student in the new normal?

2. What are the issues or problems that you encounter?
3. What coping mechanisms do you do in facing these challenges?
4. What do you recommend in order to improve you and another student's status?

Data Analysis

This study will use thematic coding in analyzing data. Thematic coding is a form of qualitative analysis which involves recording or identifying passages of text or images that are linked by a common theme or idea allowing you to index the text into categories and therefore establish a "framework of thematic ideas about it" [20]. Simply put, the objective is to identify common themes in the statement of the participants. For the researchers to attain an overall understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher carefully followed the following procedures to ensure that the data collection ran smoothly:

(1) The researchers used a purposive sampling method in this study and chose their respondents to be first-year college students who are taking up online classes. (2) The researchers followed up the participants three days before sending the link of the survey questions. This was for them to be reminded and to give them the readiness to tell their lived experiences as freshmen students in the middle of a pandemic. (3) The researcher sent the online survey to each participant on topics that were guided by open-ended questions, which represented the purpose of the study and the research questions. (4) The researchers gave the participants two to three days to complete their statement.

5. RESULTS

I. COLLEGE STUDENT IN THE NEW NORMAL

A. EXCITING CHALLENGES

Being a college freshman in this new normal is challenging but exciting too for the reason that people are going to step into a new world just like what student 1 and student 5 stated, "It is quite challenging because we are new in this form of learning but exciting because we got to explore the digital, the new way of learning" "It is not what I expected to be as I set foot into college" but adapting to new environment is the biggest challenge for most students, "It is especially hard for us first-year college students to study in the new normal because a lot of adjustments are expected to happen" "I really had a hard time adjusting with the hugely different learning environment" student 2 and student 3 stated. It might be a burden at first but sooner or later it will be attainable as

specified by student 4. Above all that, this new learning system has positive effects for some students. According to student 6, this new normal gives opportunity to meet new people from different places, helps to know how to manage time, how to adjust and respect the decisions of fellow students and the like.

II. ISSUES AND PROBLEMS AT SCHOOL

A. PRESSURE

Even before the online learning system, students were already pressured by the conventional classroom setup. It is for this reason why it is not unexpected that they feel more pressure by the sudden change of circumstances. Student 1 stated that he is pressured by his family looking up to him because he is a consistent honor student since elementary school. On the other hand, he also mentioned that he is adapting to the new normal. Student 2 admitted that he developed social anxiety. He even experienced "excessive sweating, nausea, difficulty in breathing, and a high fever" whenever he recites in synchronous meetings. Students 4 and 5 are both pressured because of workloads and modules given at the same time and with the same deadlines by their professors.

B. TIME

Managing one's time is essential in life. Students feel conflicted whenever they have to choose between their responsibilities as students and as members of their families. For Students 2 and 3, they are having difficulties maximizing their time and attending classes because of their household chores and responsibilities at home "getting in the way." According to Student 5, "I don't have much time to rest and spend time with my family because I always think about accomplishing the module to pass on time" which made him worried because most of the time, he doesn't even know where to start. Student 3 also added that he is struggling with eye strains and back pains for having to look at a screen and sitting all day with an average of 6-8 hours per day.

C. TECHNOLOGY

Not everyone has the luxury to have stable internet connections and even the privilege of having gadgets and devices to be used for the online learning system. Students 3, 4, and 6 share the same problem with internet connectivity. Student 3 said that they have 7 students in their home depending on 1 internet connection at the same time causing their internet connectivity to be slower than ever. Moreover, Student 4 mentioned that he is struggling to reach out to his professors for they are not "technology-literate" people.

III. COPING MECHANISMS IN FACING CHALLENGES

A. SELF-CARE

It is very important to take a pause and relax. The

purpose of this is to regain energy, refresh our minds, and most importantly, to have a healthier lifestyle. Students 2 and 3 find watching videos online relaxing. They also love to read books to help keep them “happy and sane.” While Student 4 rewards himself every time he has accomplished a task or an activity and that helps keep him motivated in doing his tasks and activities. According to Student 6, he always takes a bath before his online classes to start his day with a fresh mind. And lastly, Student 5 stated that “if I feel like I’m too stressed, I always find time to relax” and every student should be reminded of that statement.

B. BEING ORGANIZED

It is a healthy mentality to keep things organized and establish priorities in order to maintain an efficient and effective system in accomplishing tasks. Student 2 creates an effective schedule to help him accomplish what needs to be done first and to manage his time efficiently. He also takes down notes in class because he believes that “learning is more effective when more muscles are engaged.” Students 3 and 5 have a to-do list as well, and Student 3 makes sure he just puts what he can handle for the day so he does not get burnt out. Whereas Student 5 seeks out a place where he feels at ease and is less distracted in order to better concentrate on his professor's discussion.

C. SUPPORT SYSTEM

Students also need pillars of strength who can guide them through difficult times. With that, they should appreciate and value more those people who surround and support them. Student 1’s way of coping is “reaching out to others.” He believes that if you help one another, there will be no student left behind. Student 2 experiences breakdowns and difficulties in breathing that is why he consults his college guidance counselor every Wednesday and the guidance counselor taught him breathing exercises whenever he is having an episode. Furthermore, Student 6 participated in a department-run group study, which greatly aided him in his studies.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS IN FACING CHALLENGES

A. MENTAL STABILITY

Entering a university during this time of pandemic is not easy for everyone. As per student 1, students should think thrice before stepping into their goals because you would not excel if you have no passion in what you are doing. Mental health of the students in this new learning system is the most important. Student 2 and student 4 stated that “Be sure to give it your best effort without compromising your mental health.” “You should never sacrifice your mental health at any cost because your mental health is much important than losing your sanity just to finish some school works.” Seeking for help and setting goals is not a problem when things are heavy just like what student 3 and student

5 said, “I can recommend setting goals or checklists for each day to track what you haven’t done yet and also your progress for the day.” “Having to-do list is a must for students like me as it helps to accomplish things on time.” This situation is giving people a hard time to move forward but as mentioned by student 6, it is okay to rant but always remember to keep going.

(for confidentiality, all respondents’ pronouns are he/him/his)

6. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Little is known about the issues and challenges faced by students who transitioned to higher education in the Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic. The current study investigated the challenges experienced by higher education freshman students in the Philippines. Six students who were in the first year of higher education institutions in the Philippines participated in online semi-structured surveys. A total of 8 themes were identified from thematic coding, which include: existing challenges, pressure, time, technology, self-care, being organized, support system, and mental stability. According to Kurt Lewin's Three Stage Change Model, a period of transition is typically accompanied by feelings of hesitation and confusion. [21] Ambivalence during the change process is an expected response during a transition.

In a similar study it stated that the pandemic had also caused psychological stress among the students, making it difficult for them to focus on studying. They expressed feelings of anxiety, burnout, loneliness, grief, and hopelessness. The students worried about online assessments, future plans in school, and safety of their families from COVID-19 [22].

In line with previous research on higher education students in general [23], our results indicate that freshman students perceive the new normal as challenging, particularly with regard to their mental health status. Some students' struggles in managing their time and reported problems in concentrating.

While online learning in higher education continues to be an option for freshman students in the Philippines there are limitations and advantages. Some limitations associated with this learning are the excessive length of time some students may take to learn in a digital space [24], the limited interaction with peers and poor internet connectivity. Some advantages include the increased access to educational materials [25], and increased accessibility to information [26].

In the present study, we investigated the coping mechanisms of the freshman students during the encounter phase of their transition into higher education. This appears

to be a notably vulnerable time, yet it also opens a window of opportunity to connect with people in different places at the same time as they adjust to the new learning environment.

In line with research findings show that social support can reduce psychological distress during epidemics. [27] Mutual support enables students to overcome the problems that they face.

Overall, the results provide the insights into the lived experience of the freshman students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Knowledge about freshman students' specific challenges during crises can help universities to better respond to the needs of their students and inform future measures to help freshman students cope with difficult situations like a pandemic. This is also beneficial for incoming freshman students in the near future. That students in general must learn how to manage time and to balance school and life without compromising one's health.

7. CONCLUSION

Based from the findings established during the course of this study, the researchers have hypothesized the following conclusions: First, eight themes were discovered in from the results of the study. Second, most first-year college students feel excited yet challenged because of the new normal setting. Third, first-year pupils experience different problems that involve technology, pressure from others, and management of time. Fourth, most undergraduates created different ways to deal the current situation, they take time to tend to themselves, they organize and establish priorities and build a support system that could help them. Fifth, students suggest to always check on one's mental health and to focus on an established goal. And lastly some implications were drawn out from the study. (1) It is normal to feel hesitant and confused during the first-year of college, (2) online learning still needs to be measured and analyzed because of the different situations of the students yet it still has some advantages, and (3) knowing about the unique difficulties that freshman students face during emergencies will help universities better respond to their students' needs and inform potential steps to help freshman students deal with challenging circumstances and that students need to learn how to manage their time between school and other activities outside.

8. RECOMMENDATION

From the findings and the conclusion, the researchers offer the following scope for the future: (1) Students need to be well prepared when entering college. They should choose the course that it fit and they are capable of doing it. The program that the students will choose should also be related

to their potential work or career path. (2) Building or creating a strong relationship with others can help you in many ways. Through this many first-years can have a support system to assist them in their studies. (3) First-years should devise a system that is best for their mentality to them be more productive. Staying or studying at home presents different challenges, organizing your day and prioritizing what to do first can help them make the most out of what they have and can help them learn more. And (4) Universities and the government should provide more aid to first-years especially during perplexing times. By doing so, many students will feel that they are in good hands and help both students and staff members who are that good in handling different devices in online learning. They should also check up on students to monitor their mental health and make ways to provide help to students who are struggling.

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