

Mental health status of irregular students in a recognized private school in Northeastern Luzon; A basis for targeted support and intervention

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ABSTRACT

Irregular students often face academic delays and pressure that can affect their mental health. This study aimed to assess the levels of anxiety, depression, and stress among irregular students at the University of La Salette Inc., and to identify the factors that influence these conditions, such as gender, year level, and the number of failed subjects. It also explored the coping mechanisms students use to manage their mental health. The research used a mixed-method and cross-sectional design. Data were gathered from 1,131 irregular students through self-administered questionnaires using standardized tools like the GAD-7 for anxiety, PHQ-9 for depression, and PSS-10 for perceived stress. The study applied descriptive statistics and inferential tests such as t-tests and ANOVA to analyze the relationships between mental health and academic or demographic factors. Findings showed that 48% of the respondents experienced severe anxiety, while 24.5% reported mild anxiety and 23.9% had moderate anxiety. Severe anxiety was more common among students in board exam-related courses and those in their second and third academic years. Female students also showed higher levels of anxiety and stress compared to males. The study also found that students mostly used problem-focused coping strategies such as time management and seeking academic support to manage stress, anxiety, and depression. The study concludes that irregular students are at risk of mental health challenges due to academic pressure and setbacks. It recommends implementing school-based mental health programs, peer support groups, and stress management workshops to help irregular students cope better and improve their overall well-being.

Keywords: Irregular students, anxiety, depression, stress, coping mechanisms, academic perform

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INTRODUCTION

Mental health disorders impose a significant burden on individuals and society worldwide, and the Philippines is no exception (Nawras Zayat et al., 2024). Over the past decade, awareness of mental health's importance has grown; however, many Filipinos still face barriers to seeking care and treatment. Anxiety and depression are among the most prevalent mental health disorders in the country, affecting individuals across diverse demographics—from students and professionals to marginalized communities.

These conditions not only cause individual suffering but also present considerable challenges to productivity and overall well-being. Anxiety and depression are often linked with other health complications, reduced quality of life, and diminished academic or work performance. Furthermore, stigma surrounding mental health in the Philippines impedes open discussion, leaving many individuals to suffer silently without accessing necessary support.

As the nation advances efforts to improve mental health awareness and access to care, addressing the rising concerns related to anxiety and depression becomes critical. This requires a multi-faceted approach that includes government initiatives, community-based programs, and cultural shifts toward greater acceptance and understanding of mental health challenges.

Research by Caceres et al. (2020), titled "Impact of Academic Stress on Depression and Anxiety in College Students," highlights how academic stress—particularly irregular enrollment or academic interruption—correlates with increased anxiety and depression among university students in the Philippines. The study indicates that students facing irregular attendance or course delays experience heightened mental health risks due to uncertainty, added stress, and disrupted academic progress. These irregular students may endure greater pressure to catch up on missed classes and maintain social connections, exacerbating their anxiety and depression.

Therefore, this study aims to assess the mental health status of irregular students at the University of La Salette Inc. These students encounter unique challenges such as academic pressure, irregular study patterns, and personal stressors that may adversely affect their mental well-being. The research seeks to identify the prevalence and severity of mental health issues—specifically anxiety, depression, and stress—using validated screening tools including the Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7), Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9), and Perceived Stress Scale-10 (PSS-10). Additionally, it explores how factors such as gender, academic year level, and number of failed major subjects influence the mental health of these students.

Furthermore, the study investigates the coping mechanisms employed by irregular students to manage their anxiety, depression, and stress, evaluating the effectiveness of these strategies in enhancing mental well-being. It also examines the impact of mental health on academic performance, focusing on how these challenges may affect students' ability to succeed academically. Ultimately, the findings intend to inform recommendations for mental health support programs and academic interventions tailored to the needs of irregular Medical Laboratory Science students at the University of La Salette.

Anxiety and depression have long been recognized as factors that negatively influence performance, particularly among students who become irregular due to educational or systemic adjustments. This trend is notably observed among students after their first year. Over time, the number of irregular students tends to increase, often due to failure to meet prerequisites required for subsequent subjects. Such academic disruptions are both a cause and consequence of emotional and psychological difficulties, which may impair students' performance in the long term and impact their professional prospects and personal health.

Stress-inducing factors, such as increasing academic difficulty each semester, challenging learning environments, and the weight of expectations from peers and self, tend to accumulate as students remain irregular. This situation is especially critical in professional degree programs, where effective communication and competence within a supervised learning environment are essential. Addressing these interconnected academic and mental health challenges is therefore vital to support students' overall success and well-being.

Statement of the problem

1. What is the demographic and academic profile of the irregular students in the study, based on their entry point at the university, number of failed subjects, type of academic course, year level, gender, and course taken?
2. What are the levels of anxiety, depression, and stress among irregular students at the University of La Salette Inc., and how do these mental health concerns vary across different demographic and academic profiles?

3. What specific support programs and intervention strategies can be implemented to address the high levels of anxiety, depression, and stress among irregular students at the University of La Salette Inc.?

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches within a cross-sectional framework. Mixed methods research allows for the collection and analysis of numerical data alongside non-numerical data, such as interviews and focus groups, providing a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The cross-sectional design is appropriate for this study as it involves examining the mental health status of irregular Medical Laboratory Science students at a specific point in time.

The population for this research comprises irregular students at the University of La Salette Inc. A convenience sampling technique was used to select participants who were readily accessible and willing to take part in the study. This sampling method facilitated efficient data collection within the academic environment and reduced logistical challenges. Although convenience sampling limits the generalizability of findings due to the non-random selection of participants, it remains suitable for exploratory research aiming to generate preliminary insights into the mental health status of this specific student subgroup.

Data collection primarily involved the administration of two validated self-report instruments: the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) and the Perceived Stress Scale-10 (PSS-10). The PHQ-9 is a widely accepted screening tool for depression, assessing the frequency and severity of depressive symptoms experienced over the prior two weeks. It utilizes a Likert scale format and generates a score that categorizes depression severity from minimal to severe. This instrument is particularly useful for identifying depression prevalence among irregular students, who may face unique stressors related to academic pressures and irregular enrollment.

Complementing the PHQ-9, the PSS-10 assesses individuals' perceptions of stress over the past month, focusing on feelings of overwhelm and perceived control. Its Likert scale responses capture subjective stress levels, offering insight into how students manage and experience stress in the context of their academic challenges. Together, these instruments provide quantifiable data on key aspects of mental health relevant to irregular students.

To enrich the quantitative findings, qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups were employed. These approaches enabled a deeper exploration of students' lived experiences, emotions, and coping strategies that may not be fully captured by standardized questionnaires. By triangulating data from multiple sources, the study enhances the validity of its findings and provides a nuanced understanding of mental health challenges faced by the participants.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the data gathering process, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. The study was conducted with sensitivity to the psychological well-being of participants, offering support resources where necessary.

Data analysis incorporated both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics summarized demographic and academic profiles, including gender distribution, year level, and the number of failed major subjects, using measures such as frequencies, means, and percentages. Inferential analyses, including t-tests and ANOVA,

examined differences in anxiety and depression levels across demographic and academic subgroups, thereby identifying potential risk factors associated with mental health outcomes.

Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups were analyzed thematically to identify common stressors, coping strategies, and student perceptions. Thematic analysis facilitated the extraction of salient themes that contextualize quantitative results and inform intervention strategies. Additionally, quantitative evaluation of coping mechanism effectiveness involved correlation analyses and paired samples t-tests to assess changes in anxiety and depression scores relative to the adoption of specific coping strategies.

Together, these analytical procedures provided a comprehensive assessment of the mental health status of irregular students, highlighting the interplay between academic challenges and psychological well-being. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings allowed for robust conclusions and informed recommendations aimed at developing targeted mental health support programs and academic interventions tailored to this population.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic and academic profile of the irregular students

All these students initially entered the university as regular students but later became irregular after failing between one to five subjects. None had failed more than five subjects, indicating that irregularity often begins with relatively minor academic setbacks. The majority of respondents (95%) were enrolled in board exam courses, which suggests that students in more demanding academic programs are more likely to become irregular. The highest proportion of irregular students were in their third year (31.9%), followed by first year (26.7%) and second year (23.0%), implying that academic pressure tends to peak during the middle years of college. Female students comprised a larger portion of the sample (57.1%) compared to males (42.6%), with a small number (0.3%) choosing not to disclose their gender. The most common academic programs among irregular students were BS Nursing (33.9%), BS Civil Engineering (30.3%), and BS Medical Laboratory Science (13.4%), all known for their academic rigor.

Levels of anxiety, depression, and stress among irregular students

Anxiety was found to be highly prevalent among irregular students. Nearly half of the respondents (48.0%) experienced severe anxiety, while 23.9% reported moderate anxiety, 24.5% had mild anxiety, and only 3.6% exhibited no symptoms of anxiety. This demonstrates that a significant portion of irregular students endure high levels of emotional distress. The data further reveal that even a small number of failed subjects contributes to increased anxiety levels, as all respondents who became irregular after failing one to five subjects showed signs of elevated anxiety. Students enrolled in board exam programs were especially vulnerable, with 47.3% of these students experiencing severe anxiety, compared to just 0.7% among those in non-board exam courses. This disparity highlights the intensified pressure faced by students in highly demanding academic tracks. Anxiety levels also varied by year level, with the highest severe anxiety rate among third-year students (14.4%), followed by second-year (13.5%) and first-year (11.1%) students. Anxiety persisted among fourth- and fifth-year students at rates of 8.3% and 0.6%, respectively, indicating ongoing stress throughout the academic journey. Female students reported higher severe anxiety (30.0%) than males (17.9%), consistent with existing research that

females are more likely to experience and report academic-related emotional distress. Among academic programs, BS Nursing students had the highest proportion of severe anxiety (23.3%), followed by BS Civil Engineering (13.6%) and BS Medical Laboratory Science (5.0%). Other programs such as BS Architecture (4.7%) and BS Psychology (1.7%) also showed notable anxiety levels, while non-board programs had lower severe anxiety rates. Overall, the data underscore the prevalence of severe anxiety among irregular students, particularly in board exam courses, mid-level academic years, and female students, emphasizing the need for targeted early mental health interventions in high-pressure programs.

Depression was also a significant concern for the irregular student population. Approximately 33.1% experienced moderate depression, 21.4% had moderate-severe depression, and 11.1% suffered from severe depression. Only 6.3% of respondents reported no depressive symptoms, indicating that the vast majority faced some level of depression. Similar to anxiety, students in board exam courses exhibited higher depression levels than those in non-board courses, suggesting that the rigors of demanding academic programs contribute substantially to depressive symptoms. Depression was most pronounced among second- and third-year students, particularly in the moderate to severe categories. First-year students tended to report mild to moderate symptoms, while fourth- and fifth-year students showed relatively lower depression levels. This pattern may reflect escalating academic pressure during the middle years of study. Gender differences emerged as well; female students reported more moderate and moderate-severe depression, whereas severe depression was slightly more common among male students. Regarding academic programs, BS Nursing and BS Civil Engineering had the highest rates of moderate to severe depression, reinforcing the link between program rigor and mental health challenges. These findings highlight depression as a major issue among irregular students, especially in demanding courses and middle years, and point to the need for mental health support sensitive to academic and gender differences.

Stress was prevalent among irregular students, with most respondents (59.9%) reporting moderate stress and nearly 30% experiencing high stress levels. Only about 10.7% reported low stress, underscoring that the majority face considerable stress that may adversely affect academic performance and well-being. The connection between academic struggles and stress is evident, as students with failed subjects primarily reported moderate to high stress. Board exam courses accounted for most cases of elevated stress, indicating that the demands of these programs contribute significantly to student stress. Stress levels fluctuated across year levels; first-year students mainly experienced moderate stress, which increased during the second and third years, likely due to heightened academic pressures. Stress levels appeared to decline in the fourth and fifth years, potentially reflecting student adaptation or reduced course load. Female students reported higher moderate and high stress compared to males, suggesting greater vulnerability or willingness to report stress. Students in Nursing and Civil Engineering demonstrated the highest stress levels, consistent with the rigor of these fields. Overall, stress represents a critical concern among irregular students, particularly in challenging courses and mid-level years, underscoring the importance of targeted interventions to improve stress management and academic success.

In summary, the mental health profile of irregular students at the University of La Salette Inc. reveals that severe anxiety, depression, and moderate to high stress are widespread within this group. These conditions are especially prevalent among students in demanding board exam programs, those in their second and third years, and female students. The findings highlight an urgent need for mental health support programs tailored to the academic and demographic

characteristics of irregular students, aiming to alleviate emotional distress and enhance their academic experience and overall well-being.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the mental health status of 1,131 irregular students at the University of La Salette Inc., focusing on anxiety, depression, and stress. All respondents initially entered the university as regular students but became irregular after failing between one and five subjects. Demographic analysis revealed that the majority were female (57.1%), predominantly enrolled in board exam courses (95%), and concentrated in academically rigorous programs such as BS Nursing, BS Civil Engineering, and BS Medical Laboratory Science.

The findings regarding mental health indicated that anxiety was highly prevalent, with 48% of students experiencing severe anxiety, while only 3.6% reported no symptoms. Severe anxiety was most common among students in board exam programs, particularly those in their second and third years. Depression was also widespread, as 33.1% experienced moderate depression, 21.4% reported moderate-severe depression, and 11.1% suffered from severe depression; only 6.3% of students reported no depressive symptoms. Stress affected the majority as well, with 59.9% experiencing moderate stress and 29.4% reporting high stress levels. Similar to anxiety and depression, stress was most acute among students in demanding board exam courses and during the middle years of college.

These results underscore that mental health challenges are pervasive among irregular students at the University of La Salette Inc., with nearly all respondents experiencing some degree of anxiety, depression, or stress. The psychological difficulties were particularly pronounced among students enrolled in board exam programs, those in their second and third years, female students, and those in rigorous fields such as Nursing, Engineering, and other medical courses. The data suggest that academic failure, even limited to a few subjects, serves as a significant trigger for mental health deterioration. Without appropriate support, these issues could further impair academic performance, retention rates, and the overall well-being of students.

In response to these findings, the study proposes the FIRES Model as a targeted framework to support irregular students. This holistic and mission-driven model is rooted in the compassionate spirit of Our Lady of La Salette and aims to address both mental health and academic challenges through community-based interventions grounded in emotional solidarity, faith, and inclusive care. The first pillar, Friendship, emphasizes building safe and supportive relationships to combat isolation through peer mentorship programs such as “Kapatid Mo Ako,” confidential Friendship Circles, and informal faculty-student check-ins. The second pillar, Inclusivity, strives to eliminate stigma and promote dignity by adopting inclusive language, facilitating forums where irregular students can voice their experiences, and implementing Zero-Stigma campaigns alongside advisory councils that integrate irregular students into the broader university community.

The third pillar, Realism, focuses on practical, achievable solutions tailored to students’ realities. This includes the “One Step at a Time” Counseling Model, remedial classes, and storytelling sessions with alumni to normalize setbacks and inspire hope. The fourth pillar, Extensiveness, calls for campus-wide involvement beyond counseling offices, integrating mental health awareness into curricula, training faculty and staff in Psychological First Aid, linking students with Department of Health-accredited services, and conducting regular mental health

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screenings for early identification of distress. Finally, the Salettinian Movement pillar embodies mission-driven transformation inspired by Salettinian spirituality. This includes Reconciliation Retreats for healing academic and emotional wounds, prayer and reflection programs such as “Our Lady Weeps With You,” Ministry Ambassadors who exemplify Salettinian values, and the “Walk With Me” Spiritual Companionship Program to ensure that no student faces hardship without faith-based support.

Together, these interconnected components of the FIRES Model offer a comprehensive, culturally grounded approach to fostering mental health resilience and academic success among irregular students at the University of La Salette Inc., addressing their unique needs with compassion, inclusivity, and practical support.

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