

Problems Experienced by College Student Scholars

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Abstract – Students pursuing college degrees are undeniably confronted by many challenges and problems. This qualitative study investigates the case of student scholars in a teacher education institution in Southern Philippines. Five fourth year student scholars were purposely selected and individually interviewed to determine their personal problems as scholars. Their coping mechanisms were also identified. The findings showed that the scholars commonly experienced problems in stress management, pressure, delayed allowances, enrolment, academic loading, library, time, grades, subjects, and teachers. Other personal problems in love life, physical condition, tribal affiliation, homesickness, dormitories, and relationship with others were limited to some participants. The participants also reported coping mechanisms for each of the enumerated problems. Lastly, they disclosed that these problems affected their lives in different ways. Based on findings, being a scholar in a university does not mean leaving a normal and convenient life. The incentives they enjoy due to academic excellence do not guarantee that they are free from personal challenges. Universities should look deeper into the lives of scholars and offer assistance should there be any need to do so. Exploratory and longitudinal studies are also encouraged to investigate extensively the lives of student scholars.

Keywords – Coping Mechanisms, Personal Problems, Southern Philippines, Student Scholars, Teacher Education Institution.

I. INTRODUCTION

Everyone can attest that college life is difficult. It presents the first real challenge to students' academic motivations and skills (Astin, 1979). Moreover, college is a stage where students face myriad of pressures and challenges in the academic environment as they seek to maintain optimal performances or even to remain in the academic program (Wortman, 2004).

For some individuals, college is a high point in their lives where they look forward to it enjoys it and carries pleasant memories when they graduate. Along with this unforgettable memories are experiences filled with anxiety, doubt and struggle (Sears, 1964). There are a lot of things that could happen in college and many demands that should be satisfied (Abdullah, 2009).

As part of the students' population, scholars suffer personal problems in facing greater pressures on how they could maintain their grades and how to make it higher. As seen mostly through the experiences of others, students are striving for excellence and to be counted as achievers. These scholars are one the pride of a university. It is really true that problem "seeking" and problem "solving" is what most of students' life is all about (Klafki, 1977). Problems will surely be experienced by students but when such problems begin to appear in combinations and clusters, or if they persist for long periods, educators must take close at it.

Jones (1975) mentioned the problem areas affecting students' college lives such as health and physical hindrances, home and family relationship, leisure time, personality, religious life and church affiliation, school, social including moral and civic, and vocational. Patulin (1996) also studied varied and multiple forms of problems—financial, family/home, emotional, social, and academic problems—experienced by students in a university setting.

In the light of the problems enumerated by both authors, the researchers found it necessary to investigate various problems experienced by some student scholars. The ways and means used to overcome these problems were also investigated by the researchers to provide solutions based on first-hand experiences.

II. RELATED LITERATURE

As literatures were deliberated, achievement motivation or the generalized tendency to strive for success and to choose goal-oriented, success or failure activities, is found to be an important factor among students. It is the desire to experience success and to participate in activities in which the success is dependent on personal effort and abilities (Slavin, 1991). This motivation is one of the personal variables or factors "inside" students that affect their academic lives. Students with high achievement are motivated and persistent to work for their goals (Sprinthall, et. al., 1998). Specifically, achievement motivation is defined as a non-conscious concern for achieving excellence through individual efforts. However, quite opposite to this, is the idea of Gage and Berliner (1984) that not every student is motivated solely by the hope for success. Sometimes our performance in task is a result for our fear of failure. Such fear of failure (shame, ridicule by peers, and punishment from parents) may have more motivation force than a desire to do well.

There are many influences of the peer or people who are equal in age or status (Slavin, 1991) as the main social object of a student. Be it as models, reinforces and as an object of social comparison. But most importantly, Hetherington and Parke (1993) explained that the peers are the providers of opportunities for socializing and learning as well as in the development of a sense of belonging. These functions increase in importance as the child develops and spends increasing amount of time with peers than family. Gegato (2007) studied the stressors that affect both the academic and personal life of scholars. The result of the study shows that academic or school related issues (requirements, examination) are the three types of major stressors among the scholars in the University. Other stressors are relational and environmental stressors (including delayed allowances). Course requirements with deadlines can be the main reason of pressures and be a major stressor.

As cited in the study of Abo and Tawacal (2001) that Light and Keller (1975) subscribe to the idea that the family, not the school, is the major educational institution even in the modern society. Ronald and Schwatz (1978) throwing their support behind this point maintains that there are innumerable subtle ways by which the family may function to promote or discourage educational aspirations and opportunities for the child.

A study by Berowa (1988) as cited by Abo and Tawacal (2001) revealed that home and family problems appear to be a dominant cause for failures for the children. Berowa (1988) also cited that family varies greatly in degree to which they encourage children to perform well in school, yet such environment can contribute to the success in the classrooms.

Abo and Tawacal (2001) mentioned Gonzales (1986) who sought to draw a profile of the dismissed students determining the reasons for their academic deficiency. The reasons are found to be social in nature, involving large homes and family problems compounded by personal, emotional, and interpersonal relationship problems. The most significant factor was financial status of dismissed students belonging to large families.

A student's insufficient allowance is one of the leading problems of college students these days (Galemba, 2005; Gegato, 2007; Polo, 2003). According to Clifford and John (1982), one of the financial problems relates to the status of the student's family. Family finances may appear to be imposing serious limitations on a given students educational vocational plans.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative in nature and the researchers used open interviews to solicit needed information from the participants. Participants were purposely selected by the researchers. They served as primary rather than secondary sources. These scholars were from the College of Education admitted during the school year 2008-2009. They came from different Muslim ethnic groups (Iranun, Kalagan, Maguindanao, and Meranao) holding scholarships such as Cultural Community Grant and Special Muslim Grant.

Table I: Participants' Profile

| Student's Pseudonym | Age | Gender | Major |
|---------------------|-----|--------|-------------------|
| Nokia | 20 | Female | English |
| Soduko | 20 | Female | General Education |
| Yam | 20 | Female | General Education |
| Salah | 22 | Male | Biology |
| Hayatey | - | Female | Mathematics |

The participants were individually interviewed for more than one hour. After transcribing the interviews, the researchers used inductive method to analyze the data gathered. Inductive approach is one of the strengths of qualitative research (Maxwell, 1941). Data gathered were interpreted based on the identified themes.

The guide in the discussion was a set of questions on but were not "strictly structured" to ensure openness in participants' answers.

Table II. Duration and Schedule of Interviews

| Participant | Duration | Schedule |
|-------------|------------------|--|
| Nokia | 1 hr and 24 mins | November 11, 2011 (10:02am-11:22am) |
| Soduko | 1 hr and 21 mins | November 15, 2011 (06:53pm – 8:14pm) |
| Yam | 1 hr and 13 mins | November 16, 2011 (02:34pm – 03:47pm) |
| Salah | 1 hr and 6 mins | November 17, 2011 (12:34pm – 01:40pm) |
| Hayatey | 1 hr and 1 mins | November 17, 2011 (01:25pm – 02:24pm) |

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that the participants were of different backgrounds and profiles in terms of age, gender, CGPA, scholarship grants and tribe. These personal factors served as one of the basis in interpreting the data qualitatively. Various personal problems were also enumerated by the participants. These are problems in stress management, pressure, delayed allowance, enrollment, academic loading, library, time management, grades, subjects, and teacher were commonly experienced by the participants. Other personal problems in love life, body pain, tribal issues, homesickness, dormitories and interrelationships were limited to some participants. These problems were explained and interpreted using recurring themes.

A. Environmental Problems

Hayatey, Nokia, and Yam reported, respectively:

"When I got in the dorm, it's very noisy."

"...my only problem is the weather, and because of the climate change sometimes I suffered colds and coughs, it can cause me physically weak."

"Stealing is rampant here."

One important aspect most college students consider as they go through college or university is the kind of place they stay in (Besas, 2011). For the scholars interviewed in this study, they are free to stay in the dormitories. However, dormitories in the campus are overcrowded. Noise, scarce water supply, lack of privacy, stealing, and dirtiness were reported by some of the participants. Another problem experienced was frequent colds and coughs because of the abrupt changes in the weather.

B. Academic Problems

Nokia and Soduko respectively revealed:

"Honestly I do not focus on my studies. I always focus in my extracurricular activities... if feel relaxed."

"...I got 5.0 (a failing grade) for the first time. It's like the earth fell on me. I really cried for the first time thinking my scholarship will be lost..."

The locale of this study is a state university which allows the creation of various semi- and non-academic organizations. These groups offer social development to

students and contribute to the general education of the individual, a concept which encompasses moral, aesthetic and intellectual development. Nevertheless, problems arise when students get too involved in these groups. Some participants forgot other responsibilities such as studying. This is a problem in time management and as a result, some participants got grades lower than what is required to scholars. Some of them even failed. They attributed these failures to incompetent teachers, lack of supply of books in the library, poor academic loading and slow enrollment process. These problems experienced in relation to academics greatly affected them in their studies.

C. Psychological Problems

Psychological problems are common in many students especially those residing in dormitories. As disclosed by Hayatey, Salah, and Nokia:

"I feel stressed out when we have a problem in the family, it made me overact... I worry too much..."

"Stress attacks when passing requirements in the last minute... I sometimes experienced that."

"I'm scared to fail. I most fear it since I expect a lot. And my family is educated..."

As Pfeiffer (2001) maintains, stress is created by excessive environmental and internal demands that need constant effort and adjustment. The participants got the stress from many activities and external problems. Some of them experienced physiological (excessive workouts) and psychological stress, fear of failure and pressure pressed upon them by their families and the University.

D. Physical Problems

One of the participants experienced physical problems due to excessive workouts. Since she joined the Karate Club in the campus, she often had bruises and scars because of their training. She had her hand limped for a month.

E. Emotional Problems

Two of the participants engaged in this relationship and one participant felt the negative effects. Although it was her inspiration, she became distracted when they had problems to the point that she could not study well because she kept on thinking of ways on how to save their relationship. She said that she was pressured by her peers to have a boyfriend. Yam said:

"...of course it can really affect when we have petty quarrels and then I am in the middle of my exams..."

According to Guldner (1996) in her study on long distance romantic relationships, relationship is very evident as an intricate part of college life. Hambre (2005) also believed that students become interested in romantic relationship during college. Furthermore, Salah explained: *"Expectedly when you're in first year, first of all, the change that will happen is emotional. Of course you will adjust so sometimes you'll quite miss home..."*

In addition to emotional problems, the participants whose families are in far provinces also frequently experience homesickness as a stressor. Irritation due to overcrowded dormitories, inadequate books in the library and slow internet connections were also experienced.

F. Family Problems

As Charlton and David (1993) puts it, one problem that mostly gives impact to the emotional problem of a child is the family at home. The participants mentioned problems at home like problem with finances and marital conflicts which also affected their studies. It motivated them somehow but it also hindered them from concentrating on their studies. Yam reported:

"Yes, my father will call me when they are quarrelling. My father will tell everything to me. I feel sad because of that. They did not quarrel when I was in my high school days but when I went to college they always quarreled because of money...Sort of pressuring me because I am the eldest in the family."

G. Social Problems

Interpersonal relationships could mean relationship with peers, opposite sex and family. These relationships can contribute to their social development. However, relationship with others is not all about the goodness it brings but also about the problems with it. The participants reported that they were disturbed when they had problems with their peers. They believed that having peers is a good thing and having few is a negative one. When they are too happy talking with friends, they often forgot the time. They were much engrossed that they forgot other important things to do and deadlines to meet.

Furthermore, students came from different identities. These ethnic identities become a problem when students are ignorant about each other's beliefs and traditions. Some individuals pass judgments and generalizations. Some of the participants come from the minority groups and they often felt that they do not belong with the larger group. Soduko and Salah respectively said:

"...sometimes I took my studies for granted like homework. One example is watching Korean movies. When they are watching and I'm studying, it's like I'm motivated to watch also until I forget about studying. Another is telling stories and talking with each other too much. In the positive side, when I see them study, I'm also motivated to study..."

"It is about to be one. It is about the idea between majority and minority. To be one of the majority. To belong."

H. Financial Problems

Students' insufficient allowance is one of the leading problems of college students (Galemba, 2005; Gegato, 2007). Since all of the participants are scholars, they are given allowances and privileges by the University. These scholars reported to have experienced delayed allowances both from their parents and the University. This is a usual problem to most students and it becomes a hindrance to them. As Soduko explained:

"Sometimes the allowance is delayed when you badly needed it and you think that it can support you. There is one time when it was delayed and it really affected me."

I. Coping Mechanisms

This highlighted the different coping mechanisms employed by the participants in solving their individual problems. There were many factors why the participants overcame their difficulties in their four to five year stay in

the University. Some factors such as their good relationship with their peers, faith in God, proper mindset, motivation from their families, and self-confidence that they can overcome whatever trials that God put in their way. How they perceived the problems within their reach or way beyond their control is also a factor on how they can cope with problems they experienced. Nonetheless, it is concluded that both intrinsic (within) and extrinsic (outside) factors could contribute to the development of an individual.

V. CONCLUSION

Exploring the problems encountered by student scholars is one way of understanding what college education is all about. As findings revealed, scholars are not spared from the problems and challenges in college. Apparently, their academic excellence and intellectual capacity do not guarantee them a better and convenient college experience. Based on the findings, those problems experienced by the participants affected, in one way or another, their academic performances. The impact depended on the level of difficulty the problem poses. In view of this, a call to respond as immediate as possible to the problems experienced by not only scholars but all college students should be heeded by university officials. Parental involvement is also a practical need since most college students are still dependent on their parents or guardians.

Furthermore, in alleviating problems of student scholars, solutions should focus on those factors to address directly the cause of the problems. One of which is the renovation of dormitories as well as strict implementation of rules and regulations to alleviate distractions. Another one is expediting the release of allowances by the University and the parents in order to minimize financial constraints among scholars. Students should also manage their time and activities and strengthen the practice of effective coping mechanisms to assuage physical, psychological, and emotional disturbances.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings, few important recommendations are forwarded. First, the stakeholders of education in general should collaborate in strengthening student affairs programs and interventions. These may include seminars, workshops, and other activities that inform students about wise time management, stress debriefing techniques and strategies, interpersonal relationship, and culture sensitivity. These activities would be a great help in fostering holistic awareness among college students, most especially the scholars. Moreover, the investigation on college students' problems and concerns is still a fertile ground for further research. Thus, interested researchers are encouraged to conduct exploratory and longitudinal studies to extensively examine the nature of student' problems and the effectiveness of interventions designed to address those problems.

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