

Research Article

Uncovering the Factors that Influence Student Decisions Behind Retention and Attrition within their Academic Program

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the factors influencing students' decisions to either remain in or leave their academic programs in a private higher education institution in Calocan City. Employing a descriptive phenomenological research design, the study examined the lived experiences of 15 students, encompassing both undergraduate and graduate levels, through in-depth interviews and field text analysis. Using Colaizzi's seven-step method, four primary themes emerged: Supportive Environment, Student Synergy, Scholarly Strength, and Silent Struggles. Findings reveal that a supportive environment, characterized by faculty and administrative care, significantly enhances students' sense of belonging and satisfaction. Positive peer relationships foster collaboration and mutual support, while high-quality instruction strengthens academic engagement. However, silent struggles, including financial constraints and personal challenges, were identified as barriers to persistence. The study underscores the critical need for holistic institutional strategies that address both academic and non-academic factors influencing retention. Recommendations include fostering a culture of care, enhancing mental health and financial support services, and continuously improving teaching quality. These insights aim to guide administrators and policymakers in developing interventions to mitigate attrition and promote long-term student success.

Keywords: Educational Experiences, Higher Education, Phenomenological, Student Attrition, Student Retention

1. INTRODUCTION

Private higher education institutions (HEIs) operate with a dual identity, serving both as centers of higher learning and as business entities. As with any private HEIs, student enrollment serves as the lifeblood of the institutions, sustaining their ability to fulfill their educational mission and support their critical operations. In the competitive landscape of higher education, attracting and retaining students is indispensable not only for ensuring institutional growth and stability but also for driving long-term profitability. Just as in traditional businesses, the ability to engage, satisfy, and retain customers, in the case of private HEIs - the learners, can directly impact the institution's success and longevity.

The retention and attrition of students within academic programs have become a critical area of consideration in private higher education institutions. Different programs face challenges in maintaining student enrollment. It has become a battle cry of every higher education institution to ensure that learners will still choose their school amidst increasing competition in the field. Especially now that learners can choose from numerous options, which offer not just quality education but holistic experience that meets both academic and personal needs. Thus, it is imperative for private higher education institutions to craft programs that foster loyalty, build lasting relationships and cater to the evolving expectations of the learners, ensuring their commitment to the institution will remain.

In their 2024 study, Bernardino et al. revealed a sharp rise of students' attrition during the peak of the pandemic despite the efforts of Philippine educational institutions and agencies to ensure the continuity of learning. Furthermore, during a recent conference held at the CHED Auditorium in Diliman, Quezon City, Commission on Higher Education Chairperson Prospero de Vera III revealed that over 40 percent of the students in higher education either temporarily or permanently left school last academic year 2022-2023. Thus, the chairperson called upon colleges and universities to identify challenges and provide interventions to address the rising attrition rate among students, Sevillano (2024).

These findings align with studies from other countries. For example, Khan et al. (2024) reported that college-level completion rates in Pakistan were alarmingly low, with 45% of students leaving college without obtaining their degrees. Similarly, a 2020 report by Radio Free Asia, citing a study from UNESCO, revealed that dropout rates in several Asian countries were among the highest globally. These international trends highlight the broader challenges faced by educational institutions in retaining

students, particularly in regions affected by socio-economic instability and inadequate support systems for learners.

The retention and attrition in private higher education institutions is fluctuating, characterized by varying rates of attrition and different reasons behind students' decisions to leave. For instance, research in the Philippines has shown that many students leave due to financial constraints, a lack of academic preparation, and inadequate mental health support, Bernardino et.al. (2024). Additionally, Dalangin (2018) cited three major reasons for students' attrition: academic struggles, unresolved educational and career goals, and a failure to integrate into the intellectual and social life of the institution. The Commission on Higher Education (CHED, 2024) also points to common causes of rising attrition rates, including financial hardships, family issues, relocation, medical and mental health concerns, and academic difficulties. This variety of reasons underscores the need for comprehensive interventions to address both academic and non-academic factors influencing student retention.

Private higher education institution students' retention has been a topic of concern for many years, as colleges and universities face the challenge of refining student success and reducing dropout rates. In today's landscape, where the cost of education continues to rise and the demand for a highly skilled workforce increases, the importance of student retention is more pronounced than ever. As institutions attempt to improve student success, understanding the key factors that influence whether students persist or leave becomes crucial. How do students decide whether to stay in or leave their academic program has prompted the researcher to conduct a thorough study which aimed at exploring the key factors that influence such decisions. The central question, "What factors influence students' decisions to either stay or leave their academic program?", is addressed in this study. The findings of this study may be used as a basis for developing targeted interventions and strategies aimed at improving student retention rates. This research could also inform administrators, policymakers, and educators on how to better align institutional practices with student needs, contributing to a decrease in attrition rates.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study employed the descriptive phenomenological research design, which, as Morrow (2015) explains, focuses on revealing the essence of any phenomenon through detailed examination. The primary goal of this study is to explore and illuminate the factors influencing students' decisions to either remain in or leave their academic program.

Selections were chosen through purposive sampling. The participants were selected from one of the private higher institution in Caloocan City. In addition, participants vary in terms of age, gender, year level and highest educational attainment.

The study's nature and purpose were clearly communicated to the participants before the interviews. Consent was obtained to audio record the interviews, which were conducted via Microsoft Teams. The participants consisted of fifteen (15) students, with seven (7) being undergraduates and eight (8) enrolled in graduate programs. Of the participants, nine (9) were female and six (6) were male.

An interview guide was used during the in-depth interview focusing on the central question, "What factors influence students' decisions to either stay or leave their academic program?". Follow-up questions were asked aligned on the participants' answers during the interview. Field notes were also taken during the in-depth interview.

The audio recordings were transcribed, and detailed field texts were prepared. Through a comprehensive analysis of these field texts, the factors influencing students' decisions to either remain in or leave their academic program were thoroughly explored. Colaizzi's seven-step method of phenomenological analysis was employed, ensuring a rigorous and data-driven approach at each stage. This process resulted in a clear yet comprehensive description of the phenomenon, which was validated by the participants themselves, as noted by Morrow (2015).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study delved into the factors that influence students' decisions to either stay or leave their academic program and was explored and described in this study through an in-depth analysis of field texts. Significant statements reflecting of the selections' lived experience were identified, extracted, and categorized using Colaizzi's seven steps of phenomenological analysis. The themes that emerged during the data analysis were identified using the acronym 4S: (1) Supportive Environment, (2) Student Synergy, (3) Scholarly Strength, and (4) Silent Struggles.

1. Supportive Environment

Many participants described their experience as overwhelmingly positive, with several highlighting that they are enjoying their stay in the program. This sense of enjoyment often stemmed from how well they felt treated by both faculty and administration; and others emphasizing the support they received from the administrative staff, which made their adjustment and adaptation to the institution's culture smoother. They shared:

S9: "It feels like a second home, laging support ang admin and faculty to our needs and We are very thankful. Sobrang okay ang department, hindi sya mabigat." [It feels like a second home; the admin and faculty are always supportive of our needs, and we are very thankful. The department is really great; it doesn't feel heavy.]

S10: "Iba sa department natin, naalagaan kami dito. Iba yung alam po namin na may malalapitan kami. May gagabay at may kakampi kami." [Our department is different; we are well taken care of here. It's different knowing we have someone to turn to, someone to guide us and support us.]

S15: "I am a transferee, I thought mahihirapan ako pero mas naging madali sya. Mas naramdaman kong belong agad ako. Mas naging madali yung pag adapt ko sa culture ng school." [I am a transferee. I thought it would be difficult, but it actually became easier. I immediately felt that I belonged. Adapting to the school's culture was much easier.]

S5: "I really appreciate the assistance that I am receiving for the department, from enrollment down to attending our classes."

S6: "Ako, I really had so much fun and joy from my master's degree and up to now in PhD. I had a very smooth journey. Di pinaramdam sakín ng institution na I should stop the program, na kaya ko, kaya di ako sumusuko. Very convenient and very approachable ang mga professors sa need namin." [I really had so much fun and joy during my master's degree, and up to now in my PhD. I've had a very smooth journey. The institution never made me feel like I should stop the program; they made me feel capable, which is why I haven't given up. The professors are very convenient to approach and very accommodating to our needs.]

S7: "The experience so far, from the faculty to the dean, I have seen several transitions of different deans, but it's just the same, the assistance given to the students is superb."

Moreover, the selections have shared their challenges as they transition back to school after several years, and those returning after a demanding professional life. Despite these hurdles, they were able to adjust with the support of their professors. Some students reflected:

S5: "Although it's challenging, since I just enrolled again after my master's degree. I am very grateful to the faculty members for the support and consideration."

S2: "Our classes are actually after long hours of work, but very grateful for the consideration and assistance of the professors. In fact, I always look forward to attending our classes, even though it's after a long work, I get to enjoy and have fun since I am learning a lot from our professors and even with my classmates."

The selections expressed a deep sense of belonging and satisfaction with their academic program, describing it as a "second home." They appreciated the consistent support from both faculty and administration, which made their academic journey feel manageable and enjoyable. Students highlighted how the department provided a nurturing environment where they felt cared for, supported, and part of a community.

However, the selections also noted that without this level of support and understanding, they might feel less inclined to stay, potentially leading to their decision to leave. They shared:

S8: "Yung support, assistance and guidance, feeling ko pag nawala uli, that could lead me to stop again." [The support, assistance, and guidance—I feel like if those disappear again, that could lead me to stop once more.]

S3: "Importante kasi yung ganung feeling para mag push kami eh, so if teachers will not be considerate anymore, baka yun na yun." [That feeling is important to push us forward. If the teachers stop being considerate, that might be it for me.]

S7: "Pag wala nang support at parang nilalaro nalang ako, yung parang nandyan sya para pahirapan ka for no reason. Definitely, I will end it there." [If there's no support and it feels like I'm just being messed with, like they're only there to make things hard for no reason, I'll definitely end it there.]

S9: “Nasanay na kami na may guidance eh, pag naramdaman namin siguro na wala ng support at parang di na kami mahalaga, baka yun yung maging reason para lumipat.” [We’ve gotten used to having guidance. If we feel like there’s no more support and we’re no longer valued, that might be the reason for us to transfer.]

Teacher support can be defined as a student's perception of the care, assistance, feedback, and guidance provided by their teachers. According to Vidic et al. (2023), students identify several characteristics of teachers that they perceive as caring and supportive. These teachers are attuned to their students' needs, offer personalized leadership, facilitate a deep understanding of the content, provide academic assistance, and maintain high expectations for behavior and achievement. It is anticipated that students' perceptions of a caring and supportive school environment, marked by strong interpersonal relationships, will positively influence their overall school satisfaction. Conversely, if students perceive their school as a stressful environment, it may negatively affect their satisfaction with the school experience.

Creating a supportive and nurturing atmosphere for students is essential. This approach not only enhances academic performance but also fosters mental well-being and stability among the student body, contributing to both immediate learning objectives and long-term personal development. Implementing a friendly and welcoming student check-in process can set a positive tone for the day while also reassuring students of the institution's commitment to their safety and security (VisiPoint, 2024).

A sense of belonging is a crucial factor in the retention and academic success of college students. As discussed by Tian et al. (2021), students' cognitive evaluations of their college experiences—encompassing perceived value, quality, and expectations—positively correlate with their overall satisfaction at a particular institution of higher education.

2. Student Synergy

Student synergy highlights the collaborative, cooperative, and positive relationships among classmates, creating a dynamic where mutual support and shared goals foster a sense of belonging. When selections were asked to describe their relationships with peers, many students highlighted how warmly their classmates welcomed them. Some even expressed how much they look forward to seeing one another each day, genuinely excited to come to school. For others, these connections have gone beyond friendship; they feel as though they've found a new family among their classmates. They shared:

S9: “Ano, parang sila rin yung reason why I am excited to attend classes. Kahit maldita ako, I still feel na concern sila sa akin and masarap silang kasama.” [It’s like they’re the reason why I’m excited to attend classes. Even though I can be difficult, I still feel that they care about me, and they’re great to be around.]

S15: “Dahil nga transferee ako, isa to sa mga fear ko eh. Sabi ko, baka mahirapan ako. Pero sobrang welcoming nila, puro sila tanong agad tas kasama ko na sila agad nun kumain, then yun, tuloy tuloy na.” [Since I’m a transferee, this was one of my fears. I thought it might be difficult for me. But they were so welcoming; they immediately started asking me questions and even invited me to eat with them. From there, everything just flowed smoothly.]

S13: “I consider my school as my second home at dahil iyon sa mga kaibigan at classmates ko dito. Perfect sila.” [I consider my school as my second home, and that’s because of my friends and classmates here. They’re perfect.]

Additionally, the students emphasized the importance of a positive social environment and how it significantly benefits them. They expressed gratitude for the support and understanding they receive from their peers, highlighting how these connections enhance their school experience. The remarks shared reflect this appreciation:

S5: “I am very much grateful to my classmates, I get to learn from their experiences which I can also use and practice.”

S1: “Malaking factor ang classmates, and I am lucky to have a very supportive and understanding classmates.” [Classmates are a big factor, and I’m lucky to have very supportive and understanding classmates.]

S8: “I agree, it’s a factor, pag magaan mga kasama mo, definitely it will be easy for you too.” [I agree, it’s a factor. If the people around you are easy to get along with, it will definitely be easier for you too.]

Students expressed deep gratitude for the warm, welcoming atmosphere fostered by their peers, with many seeing their

classmates as a second family. This supportive environment makes school enjoyable and especially helps newcomers adjust. Such positive connections not only ease the academic journey but also enrich it, providing a strong sense of belonging.

Research underscores the impact of these peer dynamics. Yu et al. (2023) found that positive peer relationships significantly shape individual attitudes and feelings, supporting both academic success and personal fulfillment. Additionally, Fragata (2023) identified that peer pressure and cooperative learning positively influence students' motivation to learn Filipino. This study showed that peer support and collaborative efforts can turn peer pressure into a motivating force, suggesting that peer relationships have a partial mediating effect on academic motivation and engagement.

Supporting these findings, Tepordei et al. (2023) emphasized that early peer relationships can foster long-term social skills and emotional well-being, which are crucial for lifelong success and satisfaction. Together, these studies illustrate how positive peer interactions contribute not only to immediate academic motivation but also to sustained personal growth and life satisfaction.

3. Scholarly Strength

In addition to the support that the selections receive from teachers and classmates, they emphasize the importance of quality instruction in their learning experience. They expressed satisfaction with the teaching they receive, describing it as both rigorous and rewarding. The following statements revealed their satisfaction:

S9: “Magagaling ang mga teachers, talagang satisfied ako sa mga binibigay nila. Though minsan talaga mauubos ka pero worth it, matututo ka talaga.” [The teachers are excellent; I’m really satisfied with what they provide. Although sometimes it can be exhausting, it’s worth it—you really learn a lot.]

S1: “Holistic yung approach ng mga teachers eh, talagang ipapagawa sayo lahat ng kaya mong gawin.” [The teachers have a holistic approach; they’ll really have you do everything you’re capable of.]

S13: “I am very satisfied with what I am receiving from the professors. Full of experiences and wisdom.”

Furthermore, selections also shared their excitement for attending classes, especially for engaging tasks that enhance multiple skills:

S5: “Gusto ko yung mga activities ng professor. Ang daming target skills, speaking, listening, talagang nakakaexcite pumasok pag may nilu-look forward ka.” [I like the professors’ activities. They target so many skills—speaking, listening—it’s really exciting to attend when you have something to look forward to.]

S11: “Kahit pagod from a long day work, I am excited to attend classes because I know that I will learn something good again, nagagamit ko nga agad sya sa daily dealings ko eh.” [Even after a long day at work, I’m excited to attend classes because I know I’ll learn something valuable again. I even get to apply it right away in my daily dealings.]

Students emphasized the vital role of quality teaching in shaping their academic experiences, expressing a high level of satisfaction with the rigorous yet fulfilling instruction provided by their professors. They value the holistic teaching approach, which fosters the development of diverse skills and competencies. Moreover, many students expressed enthusiasm for class activities that make learning both engaging and practical. This positive attitude is further driven by the relevance and applicability of lessons to real-life scenarios, motivating consistent attendance and the integration of learned concepts into their daily routines.

Tertiary education must cultivate a comprehensive and continuous culture of quality, with a particular focus on enhancing the teaching and learning process. According to Suarman (2015), fostering quality in these areas is a core value that should be embedded in institutional practices. From the insights shared by students, it is evident that the quality of teaching significantly influences their decision to remain at a particular university. This underscores the importance of effectively delivering lesson content through diverse and dynamic teaching methodologies.

Research consistently demonstrates the impact of quality teaching on student satisfaction and retention. For example, Suarman et al. (2023) found a strong positive correlation between students' perceptions of teaching quality and their overall satisfaction. Similarly, Safta et al. (2022) highlighted that effective teaching methods are closely linked to higher levels of student contentment. Chandra (2021) further emphasized that poor teaching quality is a common factor behind students leaving universities. Academic challenges, when coupled with ineffective teaching, often become overwhelming and discourage students from continuing their studies. These findings reinforce the need for institutions to prioritize and continually improve the quality

of their teaching practices.

4. Silent Struggles

Despite positive experiences, several selections revealed personal challenges that could influence their decision to leave the program. Financial constraints, shifts in career aspirations, and loss of motivation were key concerns. They expressed:

S12: “Of course, I am still a student, umaasa lang po ako sa magulang, syempre sila ang nagsu-support sakin. Pag hindi na nila kaya, I have no choice, definitely kakailanganin kong huminto o humanap na mas murang school.” [Of course, I’m still a student, and I’m relying on my parents—they’re the ones supporting me. If they can’t afford it anymore, I’ll have no choice but to stop or look for a more affordable school.]

S9: “Financial din, alam nyo naman po iyan, talagang pinagsisikapan lang nila mama na makatapos ako.” [It’s also financial—you know how it is. My mom is really doing her best to help me finish my studies.]

S15: “Actually at the moment, medyo nahihirapan ako. Hindi po sa teachers or sa school kundi sa sarili ko, lately, tinatanong ko sarili ko kung it ba talaga ang gusto ko, or mas gusto ko ng ibang career. Pero ayun, dahil masaya naman po ako, kaya nandito pa din po.” [Actually, at the moment, I’m struggling—not because of the teachers or the school, but with myself. Lately, I’ve been asking myself if this is really what I want or if I’d prefer a different career. But since I’m happy here, I’m still staying.]

S11: “Minsan may mga feeling ako na tamad na tamad ako. Yan yung kalaban ko minsan eh, pero dahil masaya ako at ok naman po ako dito, laban lang. Pero ayun nga, pag nawala na yung drive or motivation, baka yan po ang maging factor.” [Sometimes, I feel really lazy. That’s what I struggle with at times. But since I’m happy and doing okay here, I keep going. However, if I lose the drive or motivation, that might become a factor.]

Students expressed the emotional and financial challenges of relying on family support, acknowledging the significant pressures that come with it. Many grappled with doubts about whether they had chosen the right career path, with some feeling uncertain about their future in the program. These internal struggles, coupled with episodes of burnout and declining motivation, underscored the delicate balance students must maintain between their personal aspirations and external expectations. Without sufficient support or if these challenges became insurmountable, many feared their academic journeys might prematurely end, emphasizing the fragile nature of their persistence.

As Bernardo and Resurreccion (2018) observed, financial pressures are a prevalent source of stress among students in higher education systems worldwide. Unsurprisingly, this stress negatively impacts the well-being of Filipino students. Adams et al. (2017) similarly noted that financial strain can significantly affect students’ psychological health and hinder their academic and social integration, which may ultimately lead them to take a break from their studies. Moore et al. (2021) added that financial stress often isolates students from wealthier peers, fostering feelings of embarrassment and exclusion, which further compounds their difficulties.

Multiple factors contribute to student dropout, including academic unpreparedness, adjusting to university life, misaligned expectations, and difficulties in pursuing long-term goals. Tamrat (2021) highlighted individual characteristics, financial challenges, goal commitment, and personal struggles as key reasons for attrition. Additionally, a report by Watermark Insights (2024) identified financial burdens, academic difficulties, the challenge of balancing commitments, and mental health issues as major factors affecting student retention. These findings underscore the importance of addressing these barriers to help students remain engaged in their educational pursuits.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underscore the critical role of a supportive environment, student synergy, scholarly strength, and addressing silent struggles in influencing students’ decisions to remain in or leave their academic programs. The strong sense of belonging, positive faculty-student relationships, and peer support emerged as essential factors fostering student retention. On the other hand, the absence of these factors could lead to leaving their academic programs. The institution's ability to provide a nurturing environment, personalized support, and opportunities for collaboration inevitably impacts student satisfaction and persistence.

To address these findings, institutions should continue fostering a culture of care and support by providing accessible faculty-student interactions and offering regular training for administrative staff to handle students' concerns empathetically. Establishing a student wellness office that prioritizes mental health, academic challenges, and financial aid may further strengthen students' commitment to their programs. Programs that encourage peer-to-peer collaboration and camaraderie, such as team-building activities, mentoring programs, and student organizations, should also be enhanced. Facilitating spaces where students can bond outside the classroom can deepen their sense of belonging and loyalty to the institution. These recommendations align with the findings of Majid et al. (2022), who emphasized the critical role of wellness programs and supportive learning environments in enhancing students' academic performance. Their study highlighted that wellness initiatives enable students to achieve optimal physical, social, and emotional functioning. Similarly, Poojary (2024) discussed how wellness programs help students unlock their academic potential by optimizing focus, information retention, and the application of concepts needed for success.

The study revealed the importance of addressing silent struggles, including financial, mental, and academic challenges. Students who feel that their struggles are acknowledged and adequately supported are more likely to persevere in their academic journey. To this end, private HEIs should establish early intervention programs, such as regular check-ins with academic advisors and mental health professionals, to identify at-risk students. Financial assistance programs, including scholarships or flexible payment schemes, should also be expanded to alleviate economic barriers. Additionally, continuous enhancement of academic programs by incorporating flexible learning options, relevant curricula, and modern teaching methodologies is necessary. Faculty members should undergo periodic professional development to ensure that their teaching approaches meet students' evolving needs. These strategies are supported by findings from the California Community Colleges Student Mental Health Program (2024), which emphasizes that mental health services are integral not only to students' psychological well-being but also to their academic success and retention. Similarly, Sutherland (2018) revealed that adolescents face significant emotional health challenges during their high school years, highlighting the unique role of school staff in helping students navigate these issues. Her study advocates for increased availability of mental health professionals, including counselors and school social workers, as well as enhanced teacher training to better support students.

Ultimately, student retention is a multifaceted issue requiring a holistic approach that addresses both academic and non-academic factors. By cultivating a positive, inclusive environment, private higher education institutions can ensure that students remain engaged and committed, despite the challenges they face. To achieve this, HEIs should implement a data-driven retention strategy that includes regularly surveying students about their needs and satisfaction. This data can inform the design of targeted programs and policies. By embedding these recommendations within their strategic framework, private higher education institutions can not only improve their retention rates but also cultivate a reputation for prioritizing student welfare and success. Central to improving the student learning journey is the provision of thoughtful, relevant, and detailed feedback, as noted by Cohen and Singh (2020). They emphasize that a learning journey lacking clear, consistent, and reliable feedback is one devoid of growth, cognitive development, intellectual challenge, and the potential for success. Similarly, Bashir et al. (2016) highlighted the critical role of feedback in enhancing the student learning experience, noting its significant impact on professionalizing teaching at the higher education level. By ensuring feedback processes are integral to their academic framework, HEIs can better support both student achievement and faculty development, ultimately contributing to stronger retention outcomes.

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