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Article

Beyond free tuition: Financial challenges, perceived academic impact, and coping mechanisms among college students in a Philippine State University

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Abstract: Financial hardship is a significant concern in higher education because it may shape students' academic persistence and overall well-being. This study examined financial challenges experienced by college students, their perceived effects, and the coping strategies they used in a tuition-free Philippine state university. The study used a qualitative design guided by reflexive thematic analysis. Twenty-two students from Benguet State University were purposively recruited and interviewed. The analysis suggests that free tuition did not eliminate financial vulnerability, which persisted through recurring school-related and living expenses, rising prices, and insufficient or delayed financial support. Participants described difficulty meeting basic needs, prioritizing their expenditures, exercising spending control, and adhering to a budget. They perceived these challenges as affecting their academic performance and continuity, concentration, physical and emotional well-being, and social relationships. In response, they employed coping strategies, including engaging in income-generating activities, requesting financial assistance, saving, economizing, practicing self-discipline, and improving their financial literacy. They also relied on positive reframing and spiritual support. Despite these difficulties, participants' accounts reflected resilience, adaptability, and resourcefulness in continuing their education. The findings informed the Adaptive Academic Persistence Model, which conceptualizes persistence as a cyclical process of appraisal, resource mobilization, adjustment, sacrifice, and reappraisal. By showing that tuition-free access does not fully eliminate financial barriers to meaningful participation, the study contributes to SDG-related discussions on quality education, poverty reduction, well-being, and reduced inequalities. The findings suggest that financial hardship remains a barrier beyond the cost of tuition and underscore the need for adequate institutional support that addresses students' indirect educational and living costs, basic needs and financial capability.

Keywords: financial stress; personal financial management; physical and emotional well-being; financial education

1. Introduction

The Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act (Republic Act No. 10931) has expanded access to post-secondary education by providing free tuition and other school fees in Philippine State Universities and Colleges [1]. However, expanded access alone does not necessarily ensure continuous enrollment or completion of degrees. Students continue to bear indirect and recurring costs, including transportation, food, housing, internet connectivity, learning materials, school requirements and family responsibilities [2,3]. Consequently, financial hardship may persist even in a tuition-free system and constrain students' ability to meet basic needs, participate fully in academic life, and remain enrolled [4,5].

A national survey conducted in the United States found that 19 % of college students have dropped out, 59 % had considered dropping out because of financial distress, and 78 % have reported that financial distress had adversely affected their mental health [6]. In another large-scale survey, Fletcher et al. [7] found that 56 % of students would have difficulty covering unexpected expenses, 68 % ran out of money at least once, and 48 % of those experiencing financial hardship reported difficulty concentrating on their studies. These findings suggest that financial distress may operate not only as an economic burden but also as a psychosocial and academic risk associated with attendance, concentration, completion of course requirements, and continued enrollment.

College is a period of significant transition during which students learn to become more independent, develop their identities, and assume greater personal and social responsibilities. Recent literature situates university life within emerging adulthood, a developmental phase in which students negotiate educational, personal, and social responsibilities while constructing pathways toward adulthood [8,9]. In this context, it is important to examine how effectively students manage their finances and how well they understand basic financial concepts, as the financial habits and management practices they develop during college may influence their future financial behavior and stability [10–13].

Although college students increasingly manage their finances independently, many continue to experience gaps in financial knowledge, confidence, and money-management skills. Decisions such as whether to acquire and repay student loans require adequate financial literacy [14]. Evidence from State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) in the Philippines likewise indicates limited knowledge of loan use, repayment and insurance products [12]. These gaps are especially consequential for those low-income, first-generation, and geographically disadvantaged students whose persistence may depend on their capacity to meet daily education-related expenses [15,16]. When limited resources are not managed effectively, financial stress may intensify and contribute to suboptimal financial decisions or psychological distress that undermines academic success and retention [17–21]. Recent findings indicate that students who experience high levels of financial stress are more likely to decrease their course load, stop out, or take a leave of absence suggesting that financial pressure can shape persistence decisions [5]. Academic persistence should be understood not solely as an individual trait, but as an outcome shaped by the students' coping capacity, family resources, institutional support, and broader socioeconomic conditions.

In the Philippine context, Zamora et al. [22] found that students in state universities and colleges face moderate levels of financial challenges, while Peña et al. [23] identified that college students face moderate levels of financial distress. Galario et al. [24] further found that students struggled to manage their allowance and financial resources effectively. In addition, students from disadvantaged or low-income backgrounds may be particularly vulnerable to financial distress because they face unmet financial needs, daily living costs, and limited household resources while pursuing higher education. In contrast, students facing little or no financial stress tend to report better well-being and higher life satisfaction [25,26]. Orr et al. [27] also identified family finances as one subcategory of the Filipino Student Depression Inventory (FSDI). These findings should be viewed against national economic indicators: In 2023, the poverty incidence for Filipino families declined to 10.9 %, yet 15.5 % of Filipinos, or approximately 17.54 million individuals, were still classified as poor [3,28,29]. This indicates that many students continue to live in households with limited capacity to absorb routine and unanticipated educational expenses.

Although literature regarding financial literacy, financial distress, and emotional well-being has grown, context-specific qualitative evidence remains limited regarding how college students experience and interpret financial challenges in their day-to-day educational experiences [12,30–32]. Much of the existing research measures financial literacy, financial distress or academic outcomes quantitatively, while giving less attention to students' own accounts of the difficulties they encounter, the effects they perceive, and the coping strategies they use to remain in college.

This gap is particularly important in state universities where tuition relief may coexist with substantial non-tuition costs. Understanding students' perspectives is essential because financial challenges may students' shape academic performance, motivation, mental health, attendance, participation, and intentions to persist. Accordingly, this qualitative study examines financial challenges, perceived effects, and coping strategies of students at a Philippine State University. Its findings may inform more responsive student support services, financial-aid policies, welfare programs, and retention initiatives for economically vulnerable students.

This study makes two distinct contributions to Philippine higher education research. First, it extends existing work on student financial management, well-being and coping [24,26] by examining how these experiences unfold specifically within a tuition-free state university context using the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping as an interpretive framework. Second, it develops the Adaptive Academic Persistence model, which frames persistence as a cyclical process of appraisal, resource mobilization, sacrifice, and reappraisal, wherein coping may sustain enrollment while also generating new academic, physical, emotional, or social strain.

The study also contributes to the broader agenda of sustainable social development by making explicit the link between student financial vulnerability and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In particular, the findings are aligned with SDG 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education because they show that formal access to tuition-free higher education does not automatically ensure meaningful participation, continuity, or completion. The study also relates to SDG 1, SDG 3, and SDG 10 by showing how poverty-related household constraints, basic-needs insecurity, physical and emotional strain, and unequal access to educational resources shape students' capacity to persist.

2. Review of related literature

2.1. Financial challenges

College students frequently encounter significant financial challenges that strain both their personal resources and academic pursuits. The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs [33] reported that 60 % of U.S. college students experienced basic needs insecurity, including food insecurity (41 %), housing insecurity (48 %), and homelessness (14 %). Similarly, Lambert et al. [34] reported that 36 % of Australian students experienced moderate food insecurity, characterized by lower-quality or less varied diets, while 30 % faced severe food insecurity involving reduced intake, skipped meals, or prolonged hunger. Indirect costs, such as transportation, meals, learning materials, living expenses, and family obligations, also continue to contribute to student financial burden, even within tuition-free higher education contexts [35]. Buffel et al. [36] further reported that job loss, reduced work hours, and deterioration in financial condition have intensified the financial pressures on students. Socio-demographic conditions, including household income, available family support, caregiving or family responsibilities, health-related costs, and the number of dependents relying on limited household resources, can intensify financial strain [4,31,37–39]. In addition, limited financial resources, pessimistic financial expectations, and lower financial literacy are associated with greater financial stress [39,40]. Heckman et al. [40] identified two key financial stressors: insufficient funds to participate in peer activities and expectations of substantial student loan debt after graduation.

Together, these findings show that financial hardship is a broad higher education concern and is not confined to less developed countries.

2.2. Impact of financial challenges

Research in behavioral economics and psychology demonstrates a strong relationship between financial stress and anxiety and the cognitive bandwidth available for complex and demanding tasks [41]. Russell et al. [31] found that this burden is particularly pronounced among students from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds. Bøe et al. [37] reported that students experiencing frequent financial difficulties had higher levels of depression and anxiety, more somatic complaints, and poorer academic outcomes, including a greater likelihood of examination failure, than their peers without such difficulties. Financial anxiety was also higher when students perceived their income as insufficient. In contrast, the ability to afford basic needs, such as food, housing, medical care, clothing, and transportation, was associated with lower anxiety [42]. In the Philippines, Aban et al. [26] identified financial struggle as a stressor that can constrain students' capacity to succeed academically.

Financial hardship also affects students' social relationships. McClure et al. [43] found that many low-income college students reported they were unable to participate in social activities because they could not afford them and felt pressure to spend money they did not have in order to participate. Moore et al. [4] similarly reported that students experiencing financial stress find it difficult to navigate relationships with more financially secure peers, leading to isolation, self-consciousness, embarrassment, and in some cases, closer identification with other low-income students. Soria and Stebleton [44] concluded that the costs of social engagement can exclude lower-income students from networking opportunities and thereby limit the social-mobility benefits of college education.

Numerous studies have linked financial hardship and stress to academic performance. Baker and Montalto [45], for example, identified a significant relationship student loan-debt, financial stress, and academic outcomes. Moore et al. [4] found that financial stress impedes students' academic success by limiting students' ability to purchase books, compelling them to prioritize work over study, causing stress-related distraction, and hindering career goals. Martinez et al. [46] argued that financial constraints may require low-income and first-generation students to work full time and live off campus, thereby reducing campus involvement and raising the risk of attrition. Larbi et al. [47] and Bennet et al. [48] likewise reported that financial difficulty can contribute to academic strain, impaired concentration, and concern about interrupting or withdrawing from studies. Financial anxiety may therefore disrupt students' capacity to function effectively in higher education.

Overall, the literature indicates that financial hardship can affect degree completion, social participation, and physical and emotional well-being, making it an important concern for policymakers and higher education administrators.

2.3. Coping

College students use diverse strategies to cope with financial challenges. Some build solidarity with peers in similar circumstances by sharing experiences and using humor to manage stress [4]. Maintaining supportive relationships and spending time with family and friends have also been associated with lower levels of financial anxiety [42]. Other students adopt problem-focused strategies such as self-employment and part-time work, although these responses may require them to sacrifice rest or self-care [49,50]. Britt et al. [39] argued that increasing students' financial resources and financial knowledge may reduce stress and improve academic achievement. Similarly, Heckman et al. [40] found that students with higher financial self-efficacy and greater financial optimism about the future were associated with lower levels of financial stress.

Much of the Philippine research on students in SUCs has used quantitative designs, leaving limited qualitative evidence on how financial challenges are experienced within the policy context created by Republic Act No. 10931. The present study addresses this gap through in-depth interviews that examine students' accounts of financial hardship, its perceived effects, and their coping responses in a tuition-free state university.

3. Conceptual framework

Figure 1 presents the study's theoretical application of Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping [51]. The model conceptualizes stress as arising from the interaction between individuals and their environment rather than as an automatic response to external events. Cognitive appraisal is central to this process: individuals evaluate whether a situation is threatening, challenging, or manageable and whether they possess adequate resources to cope with it.

Figure 1. Theoretical application of the transactional model of stress and coping to student financial hardship in a tuition-free state university.

In the present study, continuing school-related and living expenses are treated as person-environment demands or potential financial stressors. Through primary appraisal, students assess whether these demands threaten their academic participation, well-being, or capacity to remain enrolled. Through secondary appraisal, they evaluate the personal, family, peer, financial, and institutional resources available to manage those demands. These appraisals shape students' coping responses and their subsequent academic, physical, emotional, and social outcomes. Reappraisal occurs as students evaluate whether their coping responses have reduced financial strain or generated additional pressures.

The model serves as a sensitizing theoretical lens for understanding how college students respond to financial stressors. It helps explain why students who encounter similar financial difficulties may respond differently depending on how they appraise their circumstances and what coping resources are available to them.

4. Materials and methods

4.1. Research design

The study employed a qualitative research design using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). RTA is a theoretically flexible and interpretive approach for developing patterns of shared meaning across datasets. It treats coding and theme development as an active, situated process shaped by the researcher's engagement with the data. Themes are therefore analytically constructed rather than treated as objective patterns waiting to be discovered, while researcher subjectivity is acknowledged as an interpretive resource requiring reflexive examination [52,53]. RTA was selected because the study sought to develop an interpretive account of shared patterns across the dataset rather than reconstruct individual life stories. The analysis adopted an experiential orientation, focusing on how the participants understood and described their financial circumstances. Coding was primarily semantic and data-driven within the broad areas established by the research questions. The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping served as a sensitizing framework during interpretation.

4.2. Population and sampling

The study was conducted at the La Trinidad campus of Benguet State University and involved undergraduate students enrolled during the second semester school year 2023–2024. This setting was relevant because the university serves students under the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act, which subsidizes tuition and other school fees for eligible students.

Criterion-based purposive sampling was used to recruit 22 undergraduate students with direct experience of financial hardship. Eligible participants were required to be currently enrolled in an undergraduate degree program at BSU, willing to participate, and experiencing financial hardship or belonging to a household with an income below the 2023 Philippine poverty threshold of ₱13,797 per month for a family of five [54]. Sample adequacy was assessed using the principle of information power rather than a predetermined numerical target [55]. The sample was considered information-rich because of the focused aim; participants were selected based on their specific experience of financial hardship; the inquiry was guided by the Transactional

Model of Stress and Coping; and the interviews generated detailed accounts of students' financial challenges, perceived effects, and coping strategies. Variation among degree programs, year levels, sex, and marital status also enabled the analysis to identify both shared patterns and contrasting experiences. Collectively, the 22 interviews provided sufficient depth, specificity, and variation to address the research questions through thematic analysis. The deans of the respective colleges were contacted to help identify potential participants who met the inclusion criteria. These students were then contacted to confirm eligibility and arrange interviews at mutually convenient times and locations. No invited participant declined; however, four prospective participants were replaced because of scheduling conflicts. **Table 1** presents the profile of the participants.

Table 1. Profile of participants.

Code	Course/program & year level	Gender	Marital status
P1	Doctor of Veterinary Medicine – 1st year	Female	Single
P2	BS in Nutrition and Dietetics – 3rd year	Female	Single
P3	BS in Hospitality Management – 4th year	Male	Single
P4	BS in Psychology – 1st year	Male	Single
P5	BS in Tourism Management – 3rd year	Female	Married
P6	BS in Civil Engineering – 1st year	Male	Single
P7	B in Technology & Livelihood Education – 1st year	Female	Single
P8	BS in Entrepreneurship – 2nd year	Male	Single
P9	BA in English – 2nd year	Male	Single
P10	BS in Agriculture – 4th year	Female	Single Parent
P11	BS in Hospitality Management – 3rd year	Female	Single Parent
P12	BS in Information Technology – 1st year	Male	Single
P13	BS in Agribusiness – 4th year	Female	Single
P14	BS in Nutrition and Dietetics – 4th year	Female	Single
P15	BS in Entrepreneurship – 3rd year	Male	Single
P16	BS in Nursing – 1st year	Female	Single
P17	B in Public Administration – 1st year	Female	Married
P18	B in Elementary Education – 3rd year	Female	Married
P19	B in Library & Information Science – 2nd year	Female	Single
P20	B in Public Administration – 2nd year	Male	Single
P21	B in Secondary Education – 4th year	Female	Single
P22	Doctor of Veterinary Medicine – 2nd year	Female	Single

4.3. Data gathering procedure

Data were generated through individual semi-structured interviews designed to elicit detailed accounts of the financial challenges students encountered, how they perceived these challenges as affecting their academic life and well-being, and the strategies they used to cope. The interviews were conducted by the researcher in a location where each participant felt comfortable. Each interview lasted for approximately 45 to 60 minutes. With the participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. One interview conducted in Filipino was translated into English. The transcripts were later sent to the participants for their review to identify transcription errors or clarify statements. The transcripts were checked against the recordings, de-identified, corrected for evident transcription errors, and formatted for analysis. Non-substantive conversational material was not coded, but the full transcripts were retained to preserve the context of participants' accounts.

4.4. Ethical considerations

The study followed ethical procedures designed to protect participants' dignity, rights, and welfare. The protocol underwent ethics review and received ethical clearance. Written informed consent was obtained after participants were informed about the study, the nature of their involvement, and their rights. A semi-structured interview guide supported a consistent yet flexible flow of conversation. Participants were asked for permission to record the interviews and were informed that they could decline to answer sensitive questions or withdraw from the study at any time. Identifying information was removed, and interviews were conducted in English or Filipino according to participant preference. Post-interview debriefing was not conducted because the questions were non-intrusive and posed minimal risk. All data were stored on a password-protected computer accessible only to the researcher.

4.5. Data analysis

Interview data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's [52] reflexive thematic analysis involving a six-phase process: (1) familiarization with the dataset through repeated reading and preliminary note-taking; (2) coding data relevant to the research questions; (3) generating candidate themes by organizing related codes around patterns of shared meaning; (4) developing and reviewing themes against the coded extracts and the entire dataset; (5) refining, defining, and naming themes; and (6) producing the analytic account using illustrative participant extracts. These phases were applied recursively rather than as a rigid linear sequence, allowing movement between transcripts, codes, candidate themes, and the developing interpretation. Excel and NVivo 15 were used to organize transcripts, codes, and extracts; however, all analytic decisions were made by the researcher.

Methodological quality was supported through alignment among research questions, qualitative design, data gathering method, and analytic approach. Repeated engagement with the transcripts, transparent documentation of coding and theme development, and the use of sufficiently detailed participant extracts to support each interpretation further strengthened the analysis. **Figure 2** presents the thematic map, illustrating the relationships among the overarching patterns, themes, and subthemes.

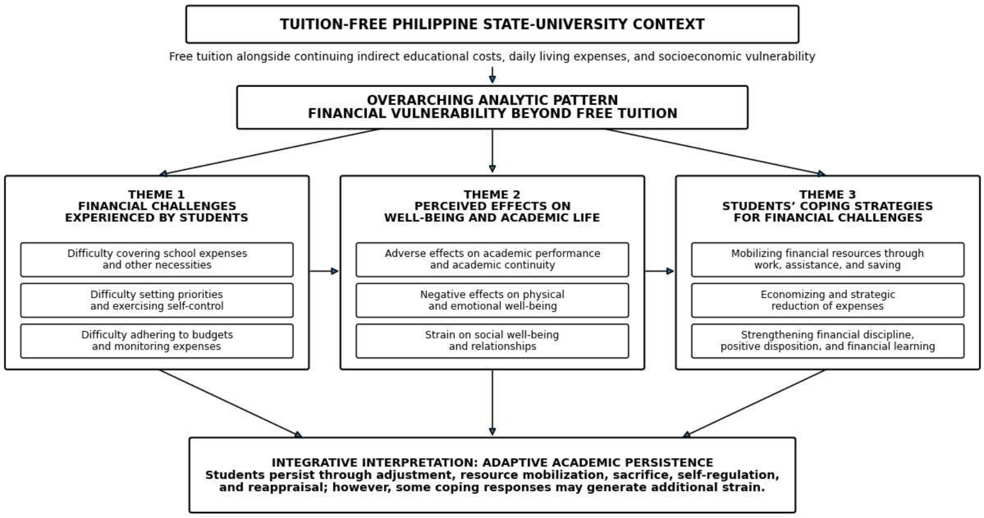

Figure 2. Final thematic map of financial vulnerability, perceived effects, and coping strategies in a tuition-free state university (Arrows indicate analytic relationships among themes rather than statistically tested causal pathways).

4.6. Limitations of the study

The study has several limitations. First, the findings represent a situated interpretation developed through the researcher's engagement with the data. The researcher's affiliation with BSU may have shaped both participants' disclosure and the analytic interpretation, although reflexive attention was given to this relationship throughout the study. Second, the study was conducted at one state university and involved students selected for their experience of financial hardship. Consequently, the findings are context-specific, and their transferability to other higher education settings should be assessed in relation to local conditions. Third, the findings are based on self-reported accounts and may have been influenced by recall, social desirability, or participants' willingness to discuss sensitive financial circumstances. The study was not intended to produce generalizations, but to develop a contextualized interpretation of patterned meanings across participants' accounts.

5. Results and discussion

Figure 2 presents the thematic map developed through reflexive thematic analysis. The overarching analytic pattern, financial vulnerability beyond free tuition, encompasses the three interrelated themes: financial challenges experienced by students, perceived effects on academic life, and students' coping strategies. Together, these themes inform the integrative interpretation of adaptive academic persistence, whereby students attempt to remain in college through resource mobilization, sacrifice, self-regulation, adjustment, and reappraisal. However, some coping responses may also generate additional academic, physical, emotional, and social strain.

Figure 3 presents the analytically developed Adaptive Academic Persistence Model, which extends the theoretical process shown in **Figure 1** using the themes generated through reflexive thematic analysis. The tuition-free state university context represents the broader person-environment setting, while continuing indirect costs and limited household resources constitute financial stressors. "Student Appraisal" corresponds to primary appraisal, through which students interpret the seriousness of financial demands in relation to their academic responsibilities and basic needs. "Coping Strategies" reflects secondary appraisal and the mobilization of personal, social, financial, and institutional resources. The perceived academic, emotional, social, and physical effects represent participants' reported experiences of financial stress and coping, while the feedback loop represents reappraisal as students repeatedly reconsider their circumstances and responses.

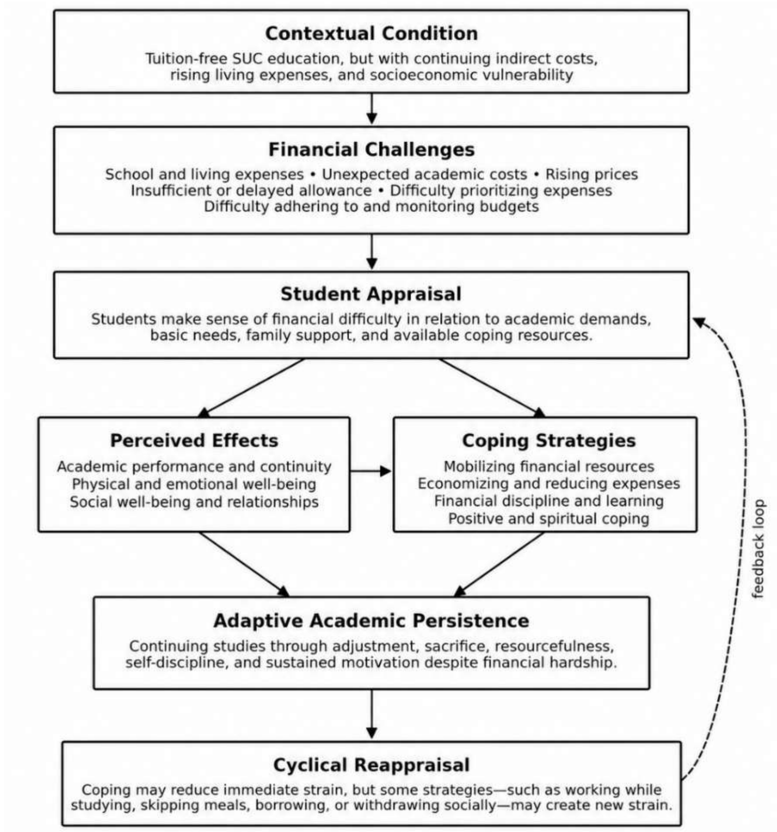

Figure 3. Analytically developed adaptive academic persistence model extending the transactional model of stress and coping in a tuition-free state university.

The model's central contribution is adaptive academic persistence. Persistence is conceptualized not as a fixed personal trait but as a continuing process of resource mobilization, sacrifice, adjustment, and reappraisal. The model also captures the double-edged nature of coping: strategies such as employment, borrowing, prudence, or social withdrawal may help students remain enrolled in the short term while creating additional academic, emotional, social, or physical strain. Therefore, persistence is not a static personal quality but an ongoing process of adaptation, sacrifice, resourcefulness, and re-evaluation.

5.1. Financial challenges experienced by students

5.1.1. Difficulty covering school expenses and other necessities

Table 2 summarizes the core ideas and illustrative participant extracts related to students' difficulty in covering school expenses and other necessities. Participant accounts indicate that financial stress was not experienced as a single or occasional burden. Rather, participants described it as a recurring condition shaped by the accumulation of various concerns such as school-related expenses, basic living costs, unexpected academic contributions, rising prices of commodities, insufficient allowance or income, and delays in receiving financial support.

Table 2. Core ideas and illustrative participant extracts on difficulty covering school expenses and other necessities.

Core ideas	Illustrative participant extracts
Accumulation of school-related and living expenses	"There are a lot of expenses I encounter in school like printing of outputs, contributions for projects… During laboratories, printing of our thesis and travel expenses because I stay in an apartment while studying." (P2) "The laboratory expenses in school are the most expensive because we have to purchase our own medical paraphernalia, aside from which are laboratory tools and materials. Add to these other expenses like manuals, uniforms, student organization fees, fines, and the like." (P22)
Unexpected academic expenses	"…my parents give me my allowance for the whole week so I really have to budget my allowance well which is a challenge for me especially if there are sudden contributions in school." (P9). "The first challenging aspect for me is when unexpected projects or school contributions arise... especially when I've already allocated my allowance for a specific purpose. This situation catches me off guard as the short notice doesn't give me enough time to prepare financially, causing stress and uncertainty." (P12)
Rising prices of basic commodities	"The bus fare going home to our house is expensive because it is far. Compared before, the fare increased dramatically. During breaks I want to go home as I miss my family but if I do, I'll be spending a lot on travel expenses and this will blow my budget." (P1) "The prices of goods have increased as well. I remember when I'm still a freshman, my budget of ₱ 3000 is enough for food and personal needs for 2 weeks. Now it's like I need ₱ 4000." (P11)
Insufficient allowance or income	"For me as a student it's hard to take all those payments in one a time because, my parents don't have a stable job to support my study." (P1) "It is difficult to manage my finances when I'm in a tight budget with little allowance and have to pay contributions." (P15)
Delayed arrival of allowance or income	"I am unable to prepare the required amount of money for assignments, especially when my mom cannot send money immediately." (P12)

Participants explained that, despite the waiver of tuition and other school fees at state universities, they continued to incur substantial school-related and everyday living expenses. These costs accumulated in ways that made financial hardship feel continuous rather than occasional. Students still described paying for laboratory supplies, instruction manuals, uniforms, student organization dues, late fees, transportation, food and personal needs. P2 and P22's accounts illustrate how program-specific requirements, particularly medical instruments, laboratory tools, organization fees, uniforms, and related materials intensified this burden. Financial strain therefore arose not from a single expense but from several academic and living costs that often had to be met simultaneously.

Unexpected expenses also emerged as an added burden. These costs were stressful not only because of their amount but also because they arose suddenly and forced students to revise already constrained budgets. P9 and P12's accounts demonstrate how sudden or short-notice school contributions created uncertainty when funds had already been allocated for other purposes. This indicates that difficulty was shaped not only by the amount required but also by the unpredictability and timing of school-related payments. For students with limited resources, even modest unexpected costs could create considerable financial pressure. P12 further explained that delays in receiving funds also postponed payment and intensified financial pressure. Collectively, the accounts suggest that financial strain arose from a mismatch between the students' limited or delayed financial resources and the numerous school-related and living expenses those resources were expected to cover.

Rising prices of essential goods further weakened students' ability to stretch their allowances. P11 explained that a budget of ₱ 3000, which had previously covered two weeks of food and personal needs, was no longer sufficient due to price increases. Other accounts linked financial difficulty to insufficient family income or allowances and to delays in receiving support, which affected students' ability to prepare funds for assignments and other academic requirements. P1 also identified rising transportation cost as a concern.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that financial difficulty was shaped not only by insufficiency and delay in the arrival of money but also by the accumulation, timing, and unpredictability of academic and living expenses. Even when tuition is waived, students may remain financially vulnerable if their resources are insufficient to meet academic and living expenses.

The findings are consistent with studies reporting that students are at risk of financial hardship as a result of limited access to financial resources and high living expenses [56–58]. They also align with Galario et al. [24], who found that students struggled to manage insufficient allowances amid the high cost of essential goods. The present study extends this literature by showing that financial constraints were experienced as recurring, unpredictably timed, and emotionally stressful.

Within the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, these financial demands became stressors when students appraised their available income and support as insufficient to meet continuing school-related and personal expenses. Such appraisals intensified the perceived burden of academic and living costs and could constrain students' participation and success in college.

The findings suggest that academic units could also coordinate and announce required contributions and materials sufficiently early to help students plan ahead.

5.1.2. Difficulty setting priorities and exercising self-control

Table 3 presents the core ideas and illustrative participant extracts concerning students' difficulty in setting priorities and exercising self-control. Unlike the previous theme, which focused on external financial pressures, this theme highlights the internal and behavioral dimensions of students' financial challenges. Participants described situations in which limited funds were further strained by impulsive purchases, difficulty distinguishing needs from wants, leisure spending, online shopping, and expenses connected to social interaction and emotional relief.

Participants described overspending and difficulty regulating their expenditures. P6's account illustrates how buying non-essential items, particularly during sales or promotions, could provide temporary excitement but later result in regret when the purchases were seldom used. P7 likewise noted that receiving a relatively large allowance did not prevent difficulty prioritizing expenses, particularly when spending on parties and visits to bars. P1 and P14 offered similar accounts, noting that numerous spending temptations made it difficult to exercise self-control and maintain priorities. These accounts suggest that financial strain was shaped not only by limited resources but also by the challenge of exercising restraint in situations with emotional or social appeal.

Table 3. Core ideas and illustrative participant extracts on difficulty setting priorities and exercising self-control.

Core ideas	Illustrative participant extracts
Difficulty exercising self-control	"It's difficult to save when there are many temptations like going out with friends, shopping, eating out, and others" (P1) "I sometimes purchase clothing that I don't have need for. There are many times I ended up regretting buying something. I just got carried away when I was out shopping, but they usually end up going into my store room and rarely being used. I guess it's just the thrill of shopping and buying things; when they have sales or promotions is when I get really excited!" (P6) I have a big allowance since my dad works abroad…I buy new clothes and flaunt them in school. Sometimes I go to bars with my friends to hang out, party and have a good time… (P7)
Difficulty setting priorities	"I really have a hard time prioritizing. I spend a lot of money on data (internet) for playing online games with friends. It sounds silly, but I am spending money to have a good time, and that adds to my money problems, but I still do it to relieve some of the stress of school and worrying about money." (P9) "too much cravings, coffee with friends, etc. Not prioritizing more important expenses actually. It's difficult particularly in budgeting my 1000-peso allowance for a week." (P14)

Difficulty setting priorities was closely connected to coping with stress. P9 recognized that spending on mobile data for online gaming worsened existing financial problems, yet also described gaming as a means of relieving school-related and financial stress and maintaining peer connection. This account is analytically important because it suggests that some spending decisions were not merely careless but also served emotional and social functions; they also served an emotional and social function. Although the expenditure further strained limited funds, it provided temporary relief through enjoyment and companionship.

Taken together, the accounts reveal two interrelated dimensions of students' financial concerns. Externally, students faced limited allowances, recurring school expenses, and rising prices. Internally, they struggled to set priorities, regulate impulses, and resist spending on wants, leisure, or socially meaningful activities. This finding is consistent with Galario et al. [24], who reported difficulty resisting impulsive purchases and managing allowances. It also aligns with Abi et al. [59], who suggested that people with scarce financial resources may still engage in discretionary spending because of optimistic expectations about the future.

These findings can also be interpreted through scarcity and decision-making. Zhao and Tomm [60] argued that scarcity can disrupt cognitive functioning and contribute to decisions that worsen financial conditions. The participants' accounts suggest that scarcity did not consistently produce strict restraint; instead, it sometimes coexisted with impulsive or emotionally driven spending. Shopping, online gaming, and similar activities offered short-term relief, social belonging, or satisfaction, even when they further depleted limited resources.

Therefore, students' difficulty establishing priorities and exercising self-control should not be viewed as solely a deficiency of the individual. The results reflect the complex interactions between limited financial resources, emotional needs, peer group pressure, consumer temptation, and the development of students' financial management skills.

From the standpoint of the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, students appeared to appraise financial strain as stressful and described behaviors that provided short-term relief; however, these behaviors positioned them for further financial difficulties after the temporary relief ended. Therefore, the greater challenge is not the availability of money but rather the students' capacity to make sound financial decisions in an environment of emotional, social, and financial pressure.

5.1.3. Difficulty adhering to budget and monitoring expenses

Table 4 presents the core ideas and illustrative data extracts related to students' difficulty in adhering to their budgets and monitoring expenses. This theme shows that students' financial challenges were not limited to the absence of budgeting practices. Rather, participants described the difficulty of sustaining a budget when school-related costs, unexpected contributions, and daily needs exceeded the amounts they had originally allocated.

Table 4. Core ideas and illustrative participant extracts on difficulty adhering to budget and monitoring expenses.

Core ideas	Illustrative participant extracts
Difficulty sticking to the budget	"I have a notebook where I list my upcoming expenses so I can adjust in case my budget can't accommodate it. Sometimes I forget to update it when I am busy with school work so I lose track and I wonder why my remaining allowance is such …so I end up spending more in certain items in my budget (P2). "As a student, balancing my finances is difficult because of limited funds and a lot of expenses like school contributions. I usually can't strictly implement my budget because of this and end up with a deficit that I must cover by borrowing from my friends or asking additional money from my parents." (P15)
Difficulty tracking spending	"The financial difficulties I faced as a student had to do with creating a budget, calculating the cost of every purchase I made, and keeping track of my daily spending like contributions for laboratory activities, fair, and school supplies." (P11) "I divide my money into all the payments and responsibilities I have like savings, pets, school, etc. However, despite dividing my income equally, in the long run it gets mixed up because sometimes school expenses exceed the allotted saved money and I have to take from the other savings and vice versa." (P22)

Participants described difficulty maintaining their budgets even when they had allocated money for specific purposes. These allocations were frequently disrupted by school contributions, academic requirements, and other costs that were higher than anticipated or omitted from the original plan. P15's account shows how students with limited allowances repeatedly revised their budgets when school-related expenses became costly but remained unavoidable. P2's account, on the other hand, reflects an ineffective budget due to failure in matching it with actual expenses. The challenge therefore involved not only creating a budget but sustaining it amid limited resources and unpredictable academic demands.

When an expense exceeded its allocated amount, students had to transfer funds from another category, postpone a payment, borrow money, or reduce spending elsewhere. Their budgets were therefore fragile and allowed little room for adjustment. Even minor deviations from planned expenditure could generate considerable pressure when funds were already limited. Budgeting was experienced less as a straightforward exercise in financial discipline than as a continuous negotiation among academic requirements, personal needs, and basic living expenses.

Monitoring expenses remained difficult even when careful allocations had been made. P22's account shows that funds initially divided among several purposes eventually became mixed when school costs exceeded the amount set aside. Accurate tracking became difficult because money had to be transferred repeatedly from one category to another. Thus, monitoring problems reflected not only the absence of transaction records but also unstable financial circumstances in which actual spending could not remain aligned with original allocations.

These findings are consistent with Alikes and Sagandoy [61], who reported that although many students tracked their expenditures, few prepared budgets and many exceeded planned spending. Bhattarai and Mongar [62] likewise found that most college students did not maintain transaction records, making it difficult to compare actual expenses with budget allocations. The present study extends these findings by showing that monitoring difficulties also arise when students must transfer limited funds among categories to meet urgent school-related needs. Budgeting difficulties should therefore not be attributed solely to weak financial discipline; they also reflect insufficient and unstable resources that require constant adjustment.

Within the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, difficulty adhering to a budget or monitoring expenses reflects students' appraisal of financial strain. When available resources could not cover planned or unexpected costs, students adjusted allocations, transferred funds, or sought short-term solutions. Budgeting therefore functioned not only as a technical skill but also as a coping process shaped by limited resources, unpredictable expenses, and the financial demands of academic participation.

The findings imply that financial-literacy support should be accompanied by structural measures that reduce unpredictable cost pressures. Student affairs offices could offer financial literacy support through seminars or scheduled consultations to guide students in budgeting and expense-monitoring techniques.

5.2. Perceived effects of financial challenges on students' well-being and academic life

5.2.1. Adverse effects on academic performance and academic continuity

Table 5 presents the core ideas and illustrative participant extracts concerning the perceived effects of financial challenges on students' academic performance and continuity. The interview accounts show that financial difficulty was experienced not only as an economic or academic concern. Rather, participants perceived it as a condition that affected their concentration, quality of academic output, ability to comply with requirements, and, in some cases, continuity in school.

Participants described financial difficulty as a condition they perceived as constraining academic performance, concentration, and progress toward graduation. For some, the effect arose from limited access to learning resources. P5's account shows how the absence of a personal computer and printer restricted the time and flexibility available to produce stronger academic outputs. Financial difficulty therefore limited not only what students could purchase but also their control over the quality and timeliness of academic work.

Other accounts associated financial pressure with reduced concentration and performance through persistent worry and competing demands. P12 experienced difficulty focusing when family support for school expenses was delayed. P8, in contrast, attributed declining performance partly to the decision to work while studying in order to address financial difficulty. These accounts suggest that financial hardship may be perceived as shaping academic success directly through inadequate resources and indirectly through coping strategies that reduce the time and energy available for study.

Table 5. Core ideas and illustrative participant extracts on adverse effects on academic performance and academic continuity.

Core ideas	Illustrative participant extracts
Negative impact on academic performance and focus	".... I mean if I had more resources I would be able to submit better outputs… For instance, I don't have my own computer and printer so I have to maximize the time I spend renting in computer shops. So when I submit my outputs, at the back of my mind, I keep thinking that I could have done better." (P5) "…it urged me to go and have part time/work, and after three months my studies were affected so my grades suffered." (P8). "The challenges cause me a great deal of stress. Not only do they strain my finances, but they also deplete my mental energy since I am unable to prepare the required amount of money for assignments, especially when my mom cannot send money immediately… This adds to the pressure and anxiety of managing my finances and affects my ability to focus on my studies effectively." (12).
Temporary interruption in schooling due to financial difficulty	"I stopped studying for a year to get a job because I can no longer finance my schooling. It was I sacrifice I had to make even though it was difficult as I will miss my friends and classmates." (P13)

Participants also associated financial hardship with interruptions in academic continuity. P13 stopped studying for one year in order to work and finance the continuation of her education. This account suggests that severe financial difficulty may affect not only academic performance but also students' educational trajectories. Although the interruption was temporary, it carried academic and emotional consequences, including the need to adjust to a new group of classmates upon returning.

This theme identifies several pathways through which participants perceived financial hardship entered academic life: limited access to learning resources, divided attention, compromised academic outputs, work–study conflict, and interruption of enrollment. The findings are consistent with Moore et al. [4], who reported that continuing financial pressure distracted students from academic responsibilities. They also align with Usman and Banu [63], who found that financially stressed students earned lower grades and completed fewer credit hours, and with more recent studies reporting negative relationships between financial stress and academic achievement [64,65]. The present accounts add contextual depth by showing how students themselves interpreted the academic consequences of financial hardship.

Viewed through the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, students' accounts suggest that appraising available financial resources as inadequate could reduce concentration, constrain academic outputs, and threaten continuous enrollment.

5.2.2. Negative effects on physical and emotional well-being

Table 6 presents the core ideas and illustrative participant extracts concerning the perceived effects of financial challenges on students' physical and emotional well-being. Financial difficulty was not experienced only as an academic or economic concern; participants also associated it with stress, worry, impaired concentration, hunger, fatigue, and the sacrifice of basic needs to meet school-related or daily expenses.

Table 6. Core ideas and illustrative participant extracts on negative effects on physical and emotional well-being.

Core ideas	Illustrative participant extracts
Stress and anxiety	"I am aware that there are many upcoming expenses in school especially in our laboratory classes so if I am not prepared, I will be stressed out and won't be able to cope up with the class activities." (P1) "The lack of funds can cause great anxiety for a student trying to balance a job; being under financial stress will definitely impact my ability to concentrate at school. Once I start to stress out, then it's very difficult for me to continue to focus on my studies because I'm always worrying about money and how I'm going to afford living expenses for that month. If I am unable to concentrate on maintaining good grades in school because of financial issues, then I become even more stressed out when I realize that I'm going to fail." (P3) "I experienced getting delayed in paying my boarding house rent for almost 2 months because I used the money for medical expenses when I had a small accident. I was worried about getting evicted, fortunately the landlord was kind enough to wait until my husband was able to send money." (P17)
Physical strain and compromised basic needs	"There are times when I cannot afford to eat; so, in order to try and stay on schedule in completing my homework; I end up studying without eating and just drinking some water. I've learned over time that sometimes it is hard to continue studying when I'm very hungry, but I have to do that, as I'm either out of money or simply saving my money for something more important." (P15) "I feel tired and weak because I skip lunch all the time and can barely afford a good meal. There are times my dinner would just be "mami (noodle) soup" bought from a shack or just a banana cue (sweetened banana)." (P20)

Participants associated financial hardship with both physical strain and emotional distress. Some accounts showed the physical cost of financial difficulty when students skipped meals, relied on low-cost food, or endured hunger in order to reserve money for more urgent school-related needs. P15's account of studying without eating illustrates how hardship was embodied through hunger, fatigue, and reduced energy. P20 likewise described feeling weak and tired after repeatedly skipping meals and relying on inexpensive food such as soup or light snacks. These accounts suggest that financial strain may compromise physical well-being when academic expenses are prioritized over regular and nutritious meals.

These findings are consistent with Aban et al. [26], who reported that students from low-income communities struggled to maintain a healthy lifestyle. The present accounts extend this work by showing how financial constraints shaped everyday eating practices, energy levels, and the capacity to endure physical discomfort while fulfilling academic responsibilities.

Emotional distress was also a recurring feature of the accounts. P1 and P3 described a cycle in which insufficient allowance generated stress, stress reduced concentration, and declining academic performance produced further anxiety.

Other accounts showed how financial instability generated persistent emotional distress. P17, for example, worried about eviction after being unable to pay rent for several months after incurring expenses related to a vehicular accident. These accounts suggest how financial stressors entered students' lives both academically and emotionally. Financial hardship was not experienced as a temporary inconvenience but as an ongoing mental preoccupation that affected concentration, study, and well-being. This finding is consistent with research showing a significant relationship between financial well-being and mental health [66–68]. Financial concerns can become persistent stressors when students perceive insufficient resources to meet basic living needs and academic requirements.

The theme illustrates a cascading process in which one financial difficulty can intensify others. Limited support may lead to skipped meals, rent arrears, borrowing, delayed academic requirements, and persistent worry about future expenses or unpaid bills. These conditions heighten emotional distress and reduce students' capacity to engage in academic work. Hunger, fatigue, and inadequate nutrition may further compound this strain and undermine overall well-being.

Viewed through the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, students appraised financial difficulty as a threat to both educational outcomes and physical and emotional well-being. When available resources were perceived as insufficient for food, housing, school requirements, and other necessities, participants experienced financial distress as a persistent stressor associated with physical and emotional strain. Financial hardship is therefore not merely a budgeting issue but a broader well-being concern that shapes how students live, study, and persist in higher education.

The findings suggest that student-support services could integrate food-voucher or pantry programs, counseling, and referrals for emergency housing or financial aid.

5.2.3. Strain on social well-being and relationships

Table 7 presents the core ideas and illustrative participant extracts concerning the perceived effects of financial challenges on students' social well-being and relationships. The accounts suggest that financial difficulty shaped not only students' academic and personal lives but also their participation in peer interactions.

Table 7. Core ideas and illustrative participant extracts on strain on social well-being and relationships.

Core ideas	Illustrative participant extracts
Socio-economic marginalization	"Peer influence knowing that we spend most of the time outside, we can't avoid certain circumstances where we try to reward ourselves… It is one of the factors that can affect the way I manage my finances because if I don't join them, they put pressure on me (P12). "There were times I feel shy when I'm with friends not being able to buy food while they want to and it is awkward since they are all eating while I'm not." (P16)
Protective withdrawal	"...I also lied that I have a part-time job so they'll stop asking me to join them (friends) in their biking sessions during weekends. The truth is bicycles are expensive and I can't afford one. One of them offered to lend me his spare bike but I still refused. When they talk about their rides, they dine in restaurants along the way and I know that it will be expensive for me because I'm saving my money for more important stuff." (P4) "Sometimes it's hard to be with friends who are in a better financial situation. They treat me many times for lunch and lend me money when I am short in cash. They understand my situation but I don't want burden them most of the time, so during lunch break, sometimes I pretend to go home so don't have to join them. I instead stay at the library to skip lunch because the truth is that I can't afford lunch at the canteen... When they invite me for outings I would usually decline and give all sorts of alibis." (P20)

Participants described how financial difficulty constrained their social well-being and peer relationships. Their accounts highlighted the discomfort of being present in situations where spending was expected but unaffordable. P16, for example, felt shy and awkward when friends purchased food while the participant could not. This experience illustrates how financial insecurity becomes socially visible during ordinary campus activities such as sharing meals, taking breaks, and participating in informal gatherings. Similarly, P12's account suggests that spending was perceived as a necessity for participating in social activities and maintaining relationships with peers who were more financially secure.

P20's account illustrates protective withdrawal from peers. Although friends were described as understanding and willing to help, the participant avoided socializing to prevent becoming a financial burden. Pretending to go home, staying in the library instead of eating lunch, and declining invitations allowed P20 to manage limited resources and avoid embarrassment. The withdrawal was motivated less by peer rejection than by the desire to preserve dignity and avoid repeated dependence. P4 described a similar pattern.

These accounts are consistent with the literature on the social consequences of student financial hardship. Moore et al. [4] found that students experiencing financial hardship struggled to build relationships with more financially secure peers, which could contribute to isolation and embarrassment. Contreras and Martinez [69] likewise reported that financial strain adversely affected physical, emotional, and social well-being, while more recent studies have linked financial strain with poorer student health and well-being [70,71]. In the present study, the participant accounts extend these findings by showing how social strain was experienced in everyday campus life through declined invitations, skipped meals, avoided gatherings, and reluctance to accept repeated assistance. Financial hardship therefore constrained participation and weakened students' sense of belonging even when peers were supportive. In contrast, social strain also arose when students felt pressured to spend beyond their means to gain acceptance or maintain relationships with peers who were more financially secure. Thus, financial hardship constrained social participation through both withdrawal and unaffordable spending.

From the perspective of the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, students appraised some social situations as financially and emotionally stressful. When they felt unable to afford peer activities or reciprocate support, social interaction became a source of discomfort rather than relief. Protective withdrawal reduced immediate embarrassment and financial pressure but could also weaken students' sense of belonging and access to social support.

5.3. Students' Coping strategies for financial challenges

5.3.1. Mobilizing financial resources through work, assistance, and saving

Table 8 shows the core ideas and illustrative data extracts related to students' strategies for mobilizing financial resources. Students did not merely endure financial challenges passively; they sought income-generating opportunities, scholarships, financial aid, loans or assistance from others, and opportunities to save portions of their allowances.

Part-time work and other income-generating activities emerged as important means of supplementing allowances and meeting school-related expenses. Some participants worked in nearby businesses, while others sold goods, tutored, farmed, babysat, or generated income online. P8's account illustrates the use of "side-hustles," particularly selling products to classmates, friends, and teachers, while P9 engaged in online selling. These accounts show how students created small income opportunities within their social and academic environments.

Working while studying, however, was not equally accessible to all students. Some could work when their academic load or class schedule allowed, whereas others were constrained by academic demands, family responsibilities, or limited employment opportunities. In more difficult circumstances, coping required major academic sacrifice, as illustrated by P13's decision to stop studying temporarily, work full-time, and finance the continuation of her education.

Students also mobilized external support through scholarships, financial aid, borrowing, and saving. P12's search for scholarships and assistance from public agencies and private organizations reflects proactive help-seeking. Students who were neither employed nor receiving assistance saved portions of their allowances when possible. P9's and P14's accounts illustrate goal-oriented saving for academic needs. These strategies depended on time, social support, access to opportunities, and personal circumstances.

Table 8. Core ideas and illustrative participant extracts on mobilizing financial resources through work, assistance, and saving.

Core ideas	Illustrative participant extracts
Working part-time	"I am now trying "side-hustles" of earning income to augment my schooling expenses like selling some products to my classmates, friends, and teachers." (P8) "I also tried to do online selling for my friend's clothes shop. At least I earn some extra cash from time to time." (P9)
Availing of financial assistance	"I didn't realize how many different agencies or private institutions provide grants, scholarships etc." (P12)
Saving money	"If I have to purchase something expensive (such as a laptop), I would save about 500 each week from my allowance until I reach my goal." (P9) "I really wanted to buy a laptop for my school needs so I started saving for it from my part-time work income." (P14)

Recent research supports the view that students' coping is shaped by access to financial and employment resources, financial knowledge, and available support systems. Tooley et al. [72] noted that earnings from employment can help cover tuition and related expenses, although the benefits and risks depend on work intensity, the work environment, and academic load. González-González et al. [73] likewise found that employment status was associated with students' coping responses, particularly under conditions of anxiety and pressure.

From the perspective of the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, these strategies reflected secondary appraisal: students assessed available resources and considered possible responses to financial difficulty. Their accounts also show that coping required time, effort, opportunity, and sacrifice and was therefore constrained by academic, personal, and structural conditions.

Within the free-tuition context, students' reliance on employment, borrowing, assistance-seeking, and saving indicates that residual college costs are being absorbed through personal labor, delayed consumption, and academic sacrifice. This extends earlier work by showing that continued access is partly sustained through coping strategies that may themselves weaken academic persistence. The findings suggest that university administrators could adopt more predictable and flexible scheduling arrangements for financially vulnerable students. Clustered classes, fewer long gaps between classes, and earlier release of timetables may help students combine their studies with part-time employment. Where academically feasible, evening, weekend, hybrid, or flexible sections may also be considered. However, these adjustments should be accompanied by academic advising and workload monitoring to ensure that employment does not compromise attendance, class performance, or well-being. The university may likewise develop campus-based, short-hour work opportunities to encourage part-time work and improve the dissemination of, and access to, existing scholarships and educational grants. The university could also consider developing emergency assistance programs for students and other financial support mechanisms.

5.3.2. Economizing and strategic reduction of expenses

Table 9 presents the core ideas and illustrative data extracts concerning students' strategies for economizing and reducing expenses. While the previous theme focused on mobilizing additional resources through work, assistance, and saving, this theme highlights how students coped with financial challenges by controlling expenses, stretching limited funds, and making practical adjustments in their daily routines.

Table 9. Core ideas and illustrative participant extracts on economizing and strategic reduction of expenses.

Core ideas	Illustrative participant extracts
Adhering to the budget	"I coped up with the situation by managing my budget for things such as for food and transportation, balance is key." (P2) "I budget my allowance strictly and every time I do grocery, I always look for the cheaper ones…" (P3)
Economizing	"I try to avoid expenses by walking instead of commuting if my destination is not far, conserving water and electricity, and other simple tasks." (P5) "…Like instead of buying bottled water and food for lunch, I pack my lunch bring a refillable water jug." (P8)
Optimizing the value of goods purchased	"I always try to find inexpensive items in the supermarkets/grocery stores every time I do my grocery shopping. Because of this I take extended periods of time, as I need to wander around to find different vendors selling similar products but at reduced prices for the same quality and amount." (P3) "As a single parent-student, I have to be wise with my spending. So, when I go grocery shopping, I first hunt for discounted products... Some new products are usually promoted through discounts. Some items that are nearing expiration and with small imperfections, like canned products with slight dents, are also sold at a discount… I mean the products are still good. They still serve their purpose plus I get to spend less." (P10)
Implementing strategies to reduce spending	"Instead of eating the canteen, I prefer to pack my food as it is a more frugal solution. Also, if I have any needs for things such as books and/or tools, I will typically borrow from classmates or friends." (P8) "…but since I can't afford them, I would usually photocopy the next lesson from my friend's books. Sometimes when the pages are too long so it would be too costly to photocopy, I borrow the books of one of my friends and read or study in advance… I also go for 2nd hand "Ukay-Ukay" clothes and shoes." (P20)

Economizing functioned as a form of everyday financial survival. Participants described repeated adjustments such as walking instead of commuting, conserving water and electricity, packing lunch, borrowing books, comparing prices, using discounts and promotions, and maintaining a balanced budget. P2's and P3's accounts illustrate budgeting as a daily coping mechanism, while P5, P8, and P20 described substituting lower-cost alternatives and using available social resources. Together, these practices show how students reduced expenses by continually adapting their consumption patterns.

P3's account of comparing grocery prices and P10's use of product discounts was not simply about choosing the cheapest item. They involved deliberate judgments about price, quantity, quality, and necessity. These accounts suggest that managing limited resources required continuous decision-making, and even ordinary purchases demanded time, effort, and sacrifice.

These findings are consistent with Cappelli et al. [74], who identified a range of student money-management behaviors, including budgeting, saving, spending control, and the reduction of wasteful expenditure. Tan et al. [75] likewise emphasized budgeting as an important financial behavior among college students managing competing costs such as groceries, transportation, rent, social activities, and other daily expenses. The participants' practices also resemble those reported by Sklar et al. [76], including coupon use, planning food consumption during periods of scarcity, and sharing food with others. Economizing can therefore function as a problem-focused coping strategy through which students reduce expenses and adjust consumption in response to limited resources.

Within the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, these behaviors represent problem-focused responses to limited resources through expense reduction and changes in consumption. At the same time, the continuous need to economize suggests persistent financial vulnerability, because even routine expenses required careful planning and sacrifice.

The findings suggest that students' coping practices, although primarily adopted to address immediate financial constraints, also appeared to strengthen their financial agency and self-management. Navigating limited resources encouraged them to plan more deliberately, maximize available funds, and develop adaptive problem-solving strategies. These experiences may have reinforced their resilience in responding to financial challenges. However, such adaptive gains should not be interpreted as evidence that financial hardship is beneficial or that institutional support is unnecessary.

5.3.3. Strengthening financial discipline, positive disposition, and financial learning

Table 10 summarizes the core ideas and illustrative data extracts concerning students' efforts to strengthen financial discipline, maintain a positive disposition, and improve their financial learning. Whereas the preceding themes focused on earning additional income and reducing expenses, this theme highlights internal and developmental coping responses, including self-control, positive reframing, and the application of knowledge gained from classes, seminars, and personal experience.

Participants described self-discipline as an important coping response to financial difficulty. P15 and P21's accounts show that self-discipline involved resisting unnecessary purchases, saving when possible, and controlling spending on non-essential items. Students therefore understood financial coping not only as obtaining sufficient resources but also as regulating their own behavior. This finding is consistent with evidence linking self-control and financial behavior [77].

Participants also strengthened their financial knowledge and applied it to everyday decisions. P14 described using saving techniques learned during a financial-literacy seminar, while P8 applied concepts from entrepreneurship courses to develop more innovative selling practices. These accounts indicate that financial education became meaningful when knowledge gained through classes, webinars, seminars, or training was translated into practical behavior. This finding aligns with Machica et al. [78], who found that financial-empowerment seminars supported desirable financial-management attitudes and practices. In the Philippine context, Tangco-Siason [79] similarly reported that first-generation college students used problem-solving, social support, cognitive reappraisal, and spiritual support to manage academic, emotional, and socioeconomic stressors.

Table 10. Core ideas and illustrative participant extracts on strengthening financial discipline, positive disposition, and financial learning.

Core ideas	Illustrative participant extracts
Practicing self-discipline	"Living a disciple lifestyle, I think, though it is easier said than done. I try my best to apply this by being thrifty and eating modestly and avoiding careless spending on unimportant things." (P15) "I think one is self-discipline. It's not because there is money that its fine to be wasteful and spend it on unnecessary things. If it is not important, it is better to just save it. But sometimes it is tempting to buy stuff so we should learn how to exercise control." (P21)
Improving disposition	"It is by accepting and adjusting to these situations and making it as a drive or motivator." (P12) "I learned to improve my mindset from experience. There are days of plenty and days of scarcity as they say. So, I save whatever excess I money I have so that I have a little security in case of abrupt expenses or emergencies." (P17)
Enhancing financial education	"One of the things that I know is to apply what I'm learning from school. Since I am an entrepreneurship student, I must know how to save not just save but to be innovative in my thinking. That's why I am trying out marketing and selling products." (P8) "Financial education is important… For instance, one time I attended a seminar on financial literacy and stuff. The speaker shared about some techniques in saving money. I really found it interesting so I applied it." (P14)
Spiritual coping and faith-based resilience	"To cope with it (financial difficulty), I lift everything to God." (P11) "…additionally, I turn to prayer for emotional support." (P13)

Other participants described maintaining a constructive mindset, seeking support, and using strategies for emotional relief. P12 viewed acceptance and adjustment as sources of motivation, while P17 responded to uncertainty by saving for abrupt expenses or emergencies. P11 and P13 drew strength from prayer. These accounts show that financial difficulty was addressed not only through practical measures but also through emotional and spiritual resources that helped students endure continuing stress.

The findings suggest two complementary forms of coping: behavioral regulation, particularly self-discipline and spending control, and personal development, including financial learning and the cultivation of a positive outlook.

Viewed through the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, these responses followed students' secondary appraisal of the resources available to manage financial demands that could not be resolved immediately. Students consequently regulated both their financial behavior and emotional responses by strengthening self-control, applying acquired knowledge, and maintaining a constructive disposition.

6. Conclusion

This study suggests that financial hardship among students in a tuition-free state university extends beyond tuition. Participants described recurring school and living expenses, unexpected academic costs, insufficient or delayed financial support, and rising prices, all of which required difficult trade-offs between academic participation and basic needs. Participants perceived these pressures as their affecting academic performance and continuity, physical and emotional well-being, and social relationships. Financial hardship should therefore be understood not as a normal feature of college life or merely an individual budgeting problem, but as an issue of student welfare, equity, and meaningful participation in higher education.

Despite these constraints, students' accounts reflected persistence, adaptability, and resourcefulness. They sought employment and other sources of income, applied for financial assistance, saved, economized, strengthened self-discipline, improved financial knowledge, and drew on personal, social, and spiritual resources. The Adaptive Academic Persistence Model captures this process as a cycle of appraisal, resource mobilization, sacrifice, adjustment, and reappraisal. However, some coping strategies also appeared to generate additional costs, such as reduced study time, compromised basic needs, or social withdrawal.

These findings have implications for the SDGs, particularly SDG 4, which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education. The study suggests that tuition-free policy contributes to access, but sustainable educational inclusion requires attention to the non-tuition costs that shape students' daily participation, well-being, and persistence. The findings also relate to SDG 1, SDG 3, and SDG 10 by showing how poverty-related vulnerability, compromised basic needs, emotional distress, and unequal access to learning resources can affect students' ability to remain and succeed in higher education. Thus, strengthening student support services is not only an institutional retention strategy but also a contribution to poverty reduction, well-being, educational equity, and reduced inequalities.

The findings suggest that free tuition can coexist with unequal capacities to remain engaged and succeed in college. Universities and policymakers should therefore complement tuition relief with timely and adequate living-cost assistance, emergency aid, basic-needs support, accessible learning resources, flexible student employment, financial education, and coordinated referral services. Such measures would reduce the burden placed on students to finance persistence through personal sacrifice and would support more equitable academic participation and completion.

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