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Aspirational Endurance: Coping and Adjustment among First-Year Students at a Provincial Philippine State University

Brix Arabejo Mirote* 

President Ramon Magsaysay State University– Castillejos Campus,
 Castillejos, Zambales, Philippines

Abstract. The first-year college transition is often discussed in terms of stress, vulnerability, and adjustment difficulty. Less attention has been paid to how students in provincial public universities make sense of these demands in relation to family expectations, peer support, and imagined futures. This qualitative descriptive study explored the coping and adjustment experiences of first-year students at a provincial state university in the Philippines. Seventy students first completed an open-ended questionnaire, and then 20 were purposively selected for face-to-face semi-structured interviews based on the relevance and depth of their responses. The data was examined through conventional content analysis, with the questionnaire responses used for screening and contextual triangulation. Three themes developed from the findings: students understood academic strain as an expected part of college life; they draw mainly on their peers and close relationships for academic and emotional support; and they interpreted this adjustment as a gradual movement toward greater responsibility, independence, and discipline. These patterns suggest aspirational endurance, understood in this study as a context-sensitive interpretive lens rather than as a validated psychological construct. It refers to the way students connect their present academic hardship with personal growth, family hopes, and longer-term mobility. This study contributes to first-year transition research by showing that coping is shaped not only by stress and support but also by the meanings students attach to endurance in a provincial Philippine higher education setting.

Keywords: first-year students; college adjustment; coping strategies; aspirational endurance; Philippine higher education

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*Corresponding author: Brix Arabejo Mirote; brixmirote@prmsu.edu.ph

1. Introduction

For many students, the move from senior high school to university is not experienced as a single academic change but as a cluster of unfamiliar demands. First-year students must respond to heavier coursework, new teaching approaches, changing peer relationships, and a greater expectation to manage their own learning. They also encounter less visible pressures, including uncertainty, emotional fatigue, and the need to convince themselves and others that they can belong in college. Earlier studies have described the first year as a period marked by stress, uncertainty, and adjustment difficulty (Dyson & Renk, 2006; Gall et al., 2000). More recent work similarly indicates that a successful transition is shaped not only by academic preparedness but also by self-regulation, motivation, social support, adaptability, and well-being (Ball et al., 2024; Holliman et al., 2022).

Adjustment is not limited to managing academic requirements. Students also learn to regulate their emotions, seek help, build confidence, and gradually see themselves as legitimate members of a university community (Credé & Niehorster, 2012; Dias-Broens et al., 2024). Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping is useful in this regard because it emphasizes that stress is shaped not only by a demand itself, but also by how a person appraises that demand and the resources available for responding to it. For first-year students, the same quiz schedule, workload, or classroom expectation may be interpreted in different ways. Some may experience these pressures as threatening or overwhelming, while others may regard them as difficult but necessary parts of becoming college students.

This interpretive dimension is particularly relevant in public higher education in the Philippines. Provincial state universities often serve students from nearby towns and communities, including learners whose college education is closely linked to family hopes, employment possibilities, and future mobility. In such settings, academic difficulty may carry meanings that extend beyond individual performance. It may also be understood as part of becoming responsible, contributing to one's family, and moving toward a more secure future. Local studies have documented academic stress and coping among Filipino college students (Austria-Cruz, 2019), anxiety and academic stress during the pandemic (Cleofas et al., 2023), and the difficulties experienced by Philippine university students during remote learning (Rotas & Cahapay, 2020). These studies are valuable, but they offer less insight into how first-year students in a provincial public university interpret ordinary academic strain during the early stage of college life.

The gap addressed in this study is therefore more interpretive than simply descriptive. It is already well established that first-year students experience stress. What remains less clearly understood is how students make sense of academic and emotional pressure when higher education is tied to personal growth, family expectations, and hopes for future opportunity. In this context, difficulty may not be experienced just as a burden. It may also be understood as part of learning responsibility, developing independence, and enduring the early demands of

college for a longer-term purpose. This study uses the term “aspirational endurance” to describe this pattern of meaning-making. In this manuscript, aspirational endurance refers to a future-oriented way of interpreting hardship in which students connect their present academic difficulty with growth, responsibility, family hopes, and possible social mobility. The term is not presented as a validated psychological construct, nor as a universal theory of student adjustment. It is used more cautiously as a tentative qualitative interpretive lens grounded in the participants’ accounts.

The study was guided by three research questions: (1) How do first-year students describe the academic and emotional challenges they encounter during their initial semester? (2) What coping strategies and support resources do they draw upon? and (3) How do they interpret these adjustment experiences in relation to personal growth, responsibility, and future aspirations?

By centering students’ own accounts, this study contributes to the first-year transition literature in a context-specific manner. It shows how academic strain may be normalized without being dismissed as insignificant. It also draws attention to peer-based coping in a provincial public university context, where students may first turn to their classmates and friends before approaching formal support services. Finally, it clarifies aspirational endurance as a modest but potentially useful lens for understanding how students connect endurance with responsibility, independence, and hope for the future.

2. Review of Related Literature and Theoretical Framework

Literature generally treats the first-year transition as more than a shift in academic level. It involves the gradual negotiation of new academic expectations, emotional demands, social relationships, and institutional routines. Earlier studies have described the first year as a period in which students encounter new roles, greater independence, and pressure to adapt to unfamiliar learning environments (Dyson & Renk, 2006; Gall et al., 2000). Credé and Niehorster’s (2012) review linked college adjustment with academic performance, persistence, and psychological functioning, while Ball et al. (2024) showed that transition success is shaped by several personal risk and protective factors. Taken together, these studies suggest that adjustment is not a narrow academic issue. It concerns the whole student and the conditions surrounding the student’s entry into university life.

Recent research also complicates the idea that students move from difficulty to adjustment in a simple sequence. Corti et al. (2023) described initial adaptation as interactive and multifactorial, while Hang and Guo (2025) argued that the first year involves both enabling and constraining experiences. This view is important to the present study because students may experience pressure and growth at the same time. A first-year student may feel tired, uncertain, or emotionally strained while still interpreting the same experience as part of becoming more capable and responsible.

Across multiple studies, support repeatedly appears as one of the conditions that make the first year more manageable. Holliman et al. (2022) linked adaptability

and social support with students' psychological well-being, while McLean et al. (2023) found that perceived support was related to first-year stress. Owusu-Agyeman and Mugume (2023) showed that social adjustment shaped academic adjustment. These findings are relevant to the present study because support is not always experienced by students through a formal university service. In everyday student life, support may first appear in ordinary and immediate forms such as shared notes, reminders from classmates, conversations with friends, or reassurance from people the student already trusts.

Belonging is another major theme in transition research. Dias-Broens et al. (2024) found that belonging is associated with academic and well-being outcomes, although the concept is defined and measured in different ways across studies. Kahu et al. (2022) further put forward that belonging includes familiarity, interpersonal connection, and academic belonging. The literature helps to explain why relationships matter in the first year of college. It also raises a question that is especially relevant in public university contexts: what happens when students rely more strongly on informal relationships than on formal institutional services?

Resilience and grit also offer useful, though incomplete, ways of understanding first-year adjustment. Lytle and Shin (2023) found that resilience and grit predicted fewer academic and career concerns among first-year students during the pandemic. Such findings point to the importance of perseverance, but they may also risk placing too much responsibility on individual students while institutional conditions remain in the background. For the present study, the issue is not only whether students persist. It is also how they explain the need to keep going, what forms of support make endurance possible, and how they connect their present hardship with their future goals.

Studies from the Global South and developing-country contexts further indicate that student adjustment cannot be separated from the setting. Gause et al. (2024) found that first-year nursing students used social, personal, and institutional coping strategies during transition. Niu et al. (2022) showed that adaptation during the pandemic was shaped by social, psychological, and educational conditions. These studies support the view that first-year adjustment is always situated. What students consider difficult, what they recognize as support, and how they define successful adjustment may vary across institutions, communities, and cultural expectations.

Within Southeast Asia, recent evidence also suggests that student adjustment is shaped by help-seeking patterns, counseling access, and the organization of the learning environments. Dessauvagie et al. (2022) reviewed the mental health of university students in six ASEAN countries and noted high levels of anxiety, depression, and stress, alongside a comparatively low willingness to seek professional help. In the Philippines, Firmante (2024) found that first-year engineering students adjusting to post-pandemic hybrid learning experienced academic and social difficulties linked to modality shifts and reduced social interaction. These studies do not directly explain the meaning-making examined

in the present study, but they strengthen the regional relevance of asking how students interpret strain and where they turn to for support.

The literature from the Philippines offers important but still limited guidance for the specific concern of this study. Austria-Cruz (2019) documented academic stress and coping among Filipino college students. Cleofas et al. (2023) examined anxiety, academic stress, and quality of life among Philippine college students. Rotas and Cahapay (2020) reported the difficulties experienced by Philippine university students during remote learning. Tangco-Siason (2025) examined coping among first-generation college students across family structures. These studies show that Filipino students encounter real academic and emotional demands. Fewer studies, however, examine how first-year students in provincial public universities interpret these demands as part of aspiration, responsibility, and future mobility.

The main theoretical lens for this study is Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping. This theory emphasizes appraisal, or the process through which individuals assess whether a situation is threatening, manageable, or meaningful, and then draw on available coping resources. In the present study, this framework shaped the questionnaire and interview guide by directing attention to the students' descriptions of academic pressure, emotional responses, coping strategies, and support resources. It also informed the analysis by encouraging attention not only being paid to the difficulties the students named, but also to how they interpreted those difficulties.

Tinto's (1993) theory of academic and social integration provided a complementary institutional lens. Although Tinto's work is often used in retention research, it is also useful for understanding how students begin to connect with the academic and social life of the university. In this study, Tinto's perspective helped frame the questions about peer relationships, formal support services, and the students' development of a sense of place within the campus community. Used alongside Lazarus and Folkman's theory, it allowed the study to consider both personal appraisal and the social-institutional conditions surrounding adjustment.

Aspirational endurance builds from these frameworks but should not be collapsed into them. Resilience usually refers to recovery, adaptation, and positive functioning despite adversity. Aspirational endurance focuses more specifically on how students give future-oriented meaning to hardship while they are still moving through it. Grit emphasizes sustained passion and perseverance toward long-term goals; aspirational endurance is less trait-like and more closely connected to how students interpret present difficulties related to family, the institution, and cultural expectations. Coping refers to the strategies used to manage stress, whereas aspirational endurance concerns the broader meaning students attach to enduring those stresses. Persistence refers to continued effort or enrollment; aspirational endurance attends to the meaning-making that helps make persistence sensible to students. Academic adjustment concerns the adaptation to university demands, while aspirational endurance asks how the

students understand those demands as part of becoming responsible, independent, and hopeful.

A certain tension, therefore, remains in this body of work. Much of the literature explains how students adjust, cope, belong, or persist. Less attention is given to how they attach meaning to hardship itself, especially where college is closely tied to family aspirations and future mobility. This study addresses that gap by treating aspirational endurance as a context-sensitive qualitative interpretive lens. It does not propose a universal model of student transition. Instead, it uses student accounts to examine how academic strain, relational support, responsibility, and future aspiration become connected during the first-year adjustment process.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study used a qualitative descriptive design to explore how first-year students described and interpreted their adjustment experiences. The design was appropriate because the study sought to remain close to the participants' accounts while identifying shared patterns in their descriptions (Colorafi & Evans, 2016; Sandelowski, 2000). The purpose was not to build a formal theory or measure adjustment statistically, but to provide a grounded account of how students experienced academic strain, coping, support, and early personal change.

3.2. Research Setting

The study was conducted at President Ramon Magsaysay State University–Castillejos Campus, a public higher education institution in Zambales, Central Luzon, in the Philippines. The campus serves students from nearby municipalities and communities, many of whom live near the campus or commute from surrounding areas. The Guidance and Counseling Services Office conducts routine first-year student interviews as part of student support and adjustment monitoring. This setting is important because college education in a provincial public university may be closely connected with family expectations, employability, and hopes for mobility.

3.3. Participants and Sampling

Seventy first-year students responded to the initial open-ended questionnaire. From this group, 20 students were purposively selected for face-to-face interviews based on the relevance and depth of their responses. Eligible participants were first-year students enrolled during the first semester of the Academic Year 2025-2026 who were willing to participate. Continuing, students and students who were not in their first year were excluded. The 20 interview participants were treated as information-rich cases because their questionnaire responses offered reflective accounts of first-semester adjustment, coping, and support. Saturation was considered reached when no new major themes emerged after several

interviews, and the same patterns of academic strain, peer-based coping, and developing responsibility appeared repeatedly.

Table 1: Profile of questionnaire respondents and interview participants

Profile item	Description
Initial questionnaire respondents	70 first-year students
Interview participants	20 first-year students purposively selected from the questionnaire respondents
Age range of the interview participants	18 to 21 years old
Gender of the interview participants	Female: 14 (70%); Male: 6 (30%)
Program areas represented	Computer science, business administration, and teacher education
General campus context	Participants were enrolled at a provincial public university campus in Central Luzon.

Note. The participant characteristics in the table refer to the 20 interview participants unless otherwise stated.

3.4. Data Collection

The initial open-ended questionnaire was distributed through Google Forms by the Guidance and Counseling Services Office as part of a routine first-year student interview. Students were informed that participation in the research study was voluntary and separate from the regular guidance and counseling services. The questionnaire asked about their early college experiences, academic challenges, emotional adjustment, coping strategies, sources of support, and perceived personal changes.

The data was collected during the second semester of the 2025-2026 Academic Year. Because the study focused on transition, the participants were asked to reflect on their first semester in college. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted at the Guidance and Counseling Services Office by the researcher, who served as the Campus Guidance Counselor. Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes. The interviews followed up on the questionnaire responses and allowed students to explain their challenges, coping strategies, support systems, and perceived personal changes in greater detail. The participants used mixed English, Filipino, and Tagalog, depending on how they preferred to express themselves. With consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented by the interview notes. The recordings were deleted after transcription to protect confidentiality.

3.5. Data Analysis

The interview data was analyzed manually using conventional content analysis following Hsieh and Shannon (2005). The analysis was mainly inductive because the codes were generated from the data rather than from a predetermined coding frame. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress and coping perspective served as a sensitizing lens, particularly for descriptions of appraisal, coping, and support. The researcher read the transcripts repeatedly, identified meaningful units, conducted open coding, grouped related codes into categories, and refined the categories into themes.

The questionnaire responses were used for screening, contextual familiarization, and triangulation, while the interview transcripts served as the main source used in the development of the themes. Filipino and Tagalog responses were translated into English by the researcher with assistance from a language expert, and the translations were checked to preserve the intended meaning. Coding was conducted by one researcher; inter-coder agreement was not calculated. Peer debriefing was conducted with a guidance and counseling practitioner who reviewed the coherence of the developing themes and interpretations. An audit trail was maintained, including questionnaire responses, interview transcripts, translated excerpts, coding notes, and theme development notes.

3.6. Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was supported through the triangulation of the questionnaire and interview data, the use of participant excerpts, and peer debriefing. Dependability was supported by the documentation on the screening, coding, and theme development. Confirmability was strengthened by retaining translated excerpts and linking the interpretations closely to the participants' accounts. Transferability was supported by describing the setting, participants, sampling, and data collection procedures. Member checking was not conducted; for this reason, the credibility strategies are described cautiously and are limited to triangulation, participant excerpts, peer debriefing, and documented analytical records.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

Institutional permission and ethical clearance were obtained from President Ramon Magsaysay State University before the data collection. No approval code or approval date was issued. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Students were informed that participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time, and that non-participation would not affect their academic standing or access to the guidance and counseling services. The data was stored on a password-protected laptop, in a locked cabinet, and on a restricted-access Google Drive. Participant identities were protected through codes from P1 to P20, and by removing identifying details from the transcripts and reported excerpts.

3.8. Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality

The researcher served as the Campus Guidance Counselor at the institution where the study was conducted. This role provided familiarity with first-year student concerns and campus support procedures, but it also required caution because the students might view the researcher as part of the institutional support system. The researcher did not personally know, teach, advise, counsel, or supervise the participants before the study. The researcher entered the study with the expectation that first-year students might experience adjustment-related concerns, partly because routine first-year student interviews are already used on campus to support transition. To reduce interpretive bias, the analysis was grounded in participant excerpts, supported by triangulation between the questionnaire and interview data, as well as being reviewed through peer

debriefing. The students were also reminded that participation was voluntary and separate from the regular guidance and counseling services.

4. Results

The analysis of the interview data produced three related themes: (1) normalization of academic strain as part of college life, (2) relational coping through peer support and limited institutional engagement, and (3) adjustment as the development of responsibility, independence, and self-discipline. These themes are presented separately for clarity, although the participants' accounts suggest that they often overlapped in practice.

The participants did not describe academic difficulty only as distress. They acknowledged the pressure, overlapping requirements, and emotional fatigue, but many also treated these experiences as expected parts of becoming college students. Their accounts suggest a pattern of adjustment in which strain was endured through peer support and gradually connected with responsibility and future aspiration.

Table 2: Summary of the themes and dimensions, with illustrative participant statements

Theme	Dimension	Description	Illustrative participant statement
Normalization of academic strain as part of college life	Increased academic demands	Students described heavier workloads, overlapping quizzes, faster pacing, and greater independence than they had experienced in senior high school.	<i>"Several quizzes happened at the same time." (P1)</i>
Normalization of academic strain as part of college life	Emotional fatigue without crisis framing	Stress and tiredness were acknowledged but were usually framed as manageable and expected rather than as signs of breakdown.	<i>"I felt drained because of the schoolwork." (P4)</i>
Relational coping through peer support and limited institutional engagement	Collaborative academic support	Classmates and friends supported the students through note-sharing, lesson clarification, reminders, and collaborative study practices.	<i>"My classmates helped through sharing notes." (P2)</i>

Theme	Dimension	Description	Illustrative participant statement
Relational coping through peer support and limited institutional engagement	Emotional support through peer relationships	Peers served as emotional anchors during periods of uncertainty, discouragement, and academic pressure.	<i>"My friends and the people I love helped me." (P5)</i>
Adjustment as the development of responsibility, independence, and self-discipline	Internalizing responsibility	Students described becoming more accountable for their time management, academic performance, and self-regulation.	<i>"I became more responsible." (P3)</i>
Adjustment as the development of responsibility, independence, and self-discipline	Growth through challenge	Adjustment was interpreted as a process that strengthened maturity, independence, and discipline.	<i>"I learned to be more independent and more disciplined." (P6)</i>

4.1 Normalization of Academic Strain as Part of College Life

Participants repeatedly described their first semester as academically demanding. They referred to simultaneous quizzes, heavier coursework, faster pacing, and unfamiliar expectations. One student recalled that several quizzes happened at the same time (P1). Another described feeling drained because of the schoolwork (P4). These comments point to the immediate academic pressure that accompanied the move from senior high school to college. What is notable is how students made sense of this pressure. Many did not describe it as unfair or impossible to handle. Instead, they treated it as something that came with college life. This does not mean that the strain was minor. Rather, the students appeared to manage it by accepting its presence and adjusting their habits, expectations, and effort.

4.2 Relationship Through Peer Support and Limited Institutional Engagement

A second theme concerned the relational nature of coping. Participants often named classmates, friends, and close others as their first sources of academic and emotional support. Peer support was practical: students shared notes, clarified lessons, studied together, and reminded one another of the requirements. As one participant explained, "My classmates helped through sharing notes" (P2). Formal institutional services appeared less often in the participants' spontaneous accounts of coping. This should not be read as dissatisfaction with those services. It suggests instead that the students tended to turn first to the people already close

to them. For the campus, this finding matters because students may be coping through informal networks even when formal services are available.

4.3. Adjustment as the Development of Responsibility, Independence, and Self-Discipline

The third theme focused on adjustment as personal development. Several participants described becoming more responsible, independent, and disciplined as they learned to manage college demands. One participant said, "I became more responsible" (P3). Another explained, "I learned to be more independent and more disciplined" (P6). These statements suggest that coping was understood not only as stress reduction. Students also linked difficulty with maturity and self-management. In their accounts, adjustment meant learning to act more like the kind of college student they believed they needed to become.

4.4. Variations Across the Student Accounts

The three themes reflect dominant patterns across the interviews, but the students did not describe adjustment in the same way. Some emphasized academic pressure, while others focused more on peer support, emotional fatigue, or personal growth. For this reason, aspirational endurance should not be read as a uniform experience shared equally by all participants. It is better understood as a recurring interpretive pattern across different student accounts.

4.5. Dynamic Model of Aspirational Endurance

The themes suggest that first-year adjustment was not a simple movement from challenge to coping to growth. Academic strain, meaning-making, peer support, responsibility, and future aspiration shaped one another over time. Peer support, for example, helped the students manage pressure, but it also appeared to influence how they interpreted later difficulties. Likewise, becoming more responsible seemed to help some students view subsequent challenges as more manageable.

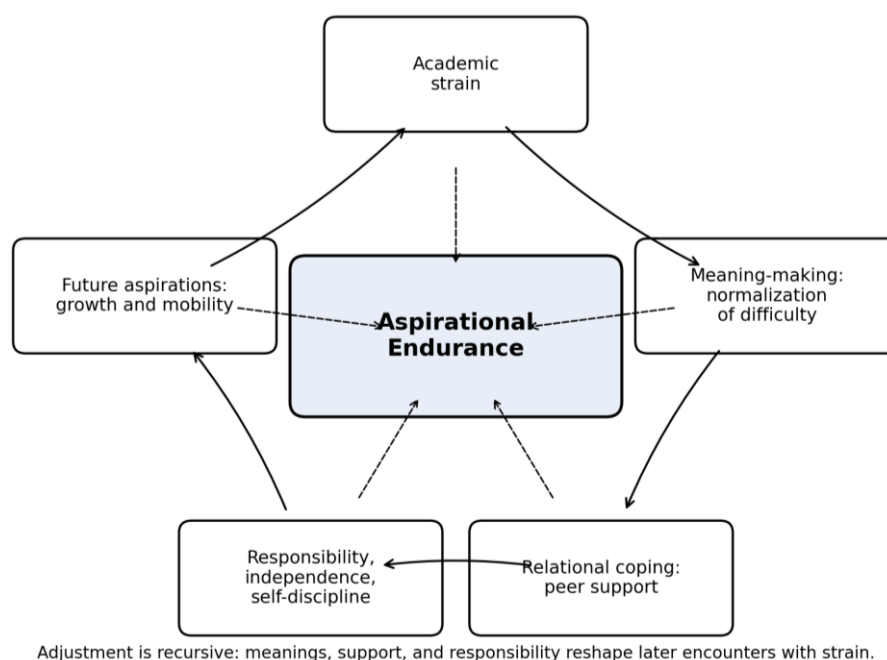


Figure 1: Dynamic model of aspirational endurance in first-year college adjustment

Note. The model illustrates how academic strain, meaning-making, relational coping, responsibility, and future aspirations interact recursively in the students' adjustment experiences.

4.6. Emerging Interpretive Insight

Considered together, the themes show that the students were not merely reacting to stress in separate episodes. They were trying to make sense of college as a demanding but meaningful transition. Their endurance was often quiet. The students did not always describe their struggles as requiring formal help, even when they spoke about fatigue or pressure. This creates a practical concern: a student may appear adjusted while still carrying difficulties that remain largely unseen.

5. Discussion

This study examined how first-year students at a provincial Philippine state university described academic and emotional challenges, identified coping resources, and interpreted adjustment in relation to growth and aspiration. In relation to the first research question, the students described academic strain through heavier workloads, overlapping requirements, faster pacing, and emotional fatigue. This is consistent with studies showing that the transition to university involves academic and psychosocial demands (Ball et al., 2024; Corti et al., 2023; Gause et al., 2024). The present study adds that the participants often treated these pressures as difficult but expected, rather than as crises.

In relation to the second research question, the students relied strongly on peer-based coping. This finding is consistent with the studies that have emphasized social support in first-year adjustment (McLean et al., 2023; Owusu-Agyeman & Mugume, 2023; Stokoe et al., 2024). It also connects with Kahu et al.'s (2022) view that belonging includes academic and interpersonal dimensions. In this study,

peers provided both practical academic help and emotional reassurance. Formal services, however, appeared less often in the students' spontaneous accounts, suggesting a possible gap between the available support and the forms of help students most readily use.

In relation to the third research question, the students interpreted adjustment as becoming more responsible, independent, and disciplined. This finding aligns with the research showing that first-year adjustment involves self-management and identity formation (Niu et al., 2022). It also relates to resilience and grit research, which recognizes the role of perseverance in students' academic lives (Lytle & Shin, 2023). The distinction is that the participants in this study did not only show resilience as recovery or grit as perseverance. They gave hardship a future-oriented meaning connected to growth, family hope, and mobility.

The concept of aspirational endurance is the study's main theoretical contribution. It extends Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) framework by showing that appraisal may involve more than judging threat and coping resources. Students may also interpret hardship as meaningful because it is connected to future goals. The concept complements Tinto's (1993) integration perspective. The students' continuation through difficulty was shaped not only by academic and social connections, but also by how college was understood as part of becoming responsible and moving toward a better future.

The findings may also be read cautiously in relation to the culturally familiar idea of "*pagtitiis*" [endurance] and relational support. This study does not claim that these ideas fully explain all participants' experiences, nor does it reduce the Filipino student adjustment to cultural traits. Rather, the findings suggest that endurance, family-oriented aspiration, and peer support provide a useful context for understanding why students may normalize difficulty and continue despite pressure. This interpretation is particularly relevant in provincial public universities, where higher education is often tied to family expectations, employability, and social mobility.

Figure 1 clarifies why aspirational endurance should not be treated as a linear pathway. Academic strain may push students toward peer support, but peer support can also change how later pressure is understood. In a similar way, developing responsibility may help students reinterpret later challenges as manageable. This recursive movement helps explain why students may appear adjusted while still experiencing pressure. Institutional support should look beyond visible crises and attend to quieter forms of endurance.

6. Practical Implications

The findings point to several practical steps for offices and personnel already involved in first-year support, particularly the Guidance and Counseling Services Office, academic advisers, faculty members, academic departments, university administrators, and student support services. Because many of the participants treated academic strain as normal, support services should not wait for students to ask for help. Early check-ins during the first semester may help identify

students who appear to be coping but are carrying academic or emotional pressure.

The Guidance and Counseling Services Office may use the findings to refine orientation activities, routine first-year student interviews, guidance and counseling services, peer mentoring, and referral procedures. Orientation programs can include brief discussions on managing workload, recognizing emotional fatigue, and using support services without stigma. Routine first-year student interviews can ask about academic pressure, peer support, comfort when seeking help, and personal aspirations. These questions may help counselors notice students whose endurance is masking distress.

Peer mentoring should also be strengthened because students already rely on classmates and friends for practical and emotional support. Trained peer mentors can help first-year students locate academic resources, manage requirements, and view help-seeking as part of adjustment rather than as a sign of weakness. Small group transition sessions may also give students a space to discuss pressure, responsibility, and aspiration in a less formal setting. Faculty members and academic departments can support adjustment through academic advising, homeroom or adviser systems, and student organization activities. Academic advisers may provide early reminders about workload planning, consultation hours, and referral pathways. Faculty members can reduce unnecessary uncertainty by making the course expectations clear, coordinating major deadlines where possible, and encouraging students to seek help before any pressure felt becomes overwhelming.

University administrators may use the findings to improve the coordination among academic departments, the Guidance and Counseling Services Office, student organizations, and referral systems. In provincial public universities, support programs may be more effective when they acknowledge the students' hopes for family and future mobility while also making formal help easier to notice, approach, and use early. Student support should recognize endurance, but it should not leave the students to endure alone.

7. Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, the study was conducted in one provincial public university, so the findings are not intended for statistical generalization. The contextual details provided may help readers judge whether the findings are transferable to similar settings. Second, the interview participants were purposively selected from students who gave relevant and reflective questionnaire responses, which may have shaped the range of experiences represented. Third, the accounts were retrospective because the students reflected on their first-semester adjustment during the second semester. Fourth, the study relied on the students' self-reported experiences and did not include the perspectives of faculty members, parents, or other support personnel.

8. Recommendations for Future Research

Future research may follow first-year students across their first year or into later years of study. Longitudinal work could examine whether aspirational endurance remains stable, changes over time, or becomes linked to persistence, help-seeking, academic performance, and retention. Comparative studies across provincial public universities, private universities, and urban universities may also clarify whether and how institutional location, resources, and student background shape adjustment.

Future studies may also examine whether aspirational endurance can be developed into a measurable construct. Scale-development or mixed-methods research could explore its relationship with resilience, grit, coping, belonging, help-seeking, academic adjustment, and student persistence. Because the present study is qualitative, aspirational endurance should be treated here as a context-specific interpretive lens rather than as a validated psychological scale.

9. Conclusion

This study explored the coping and adjustment experiences of first-year students at a provincial Philippine state university. The findings show that students experienced academic pressure, overlapping requirements, and emotional fatigue, but often interpreted these challenges as expected parts of college life rather than as crises. Their coping was strongly relational, with their peers and close social networks providing immediate academic and emotional support. Adjustment was also described as a process of becoming more responsible, independent, and self-disciplined. These patterns point to aspirational endurance, a context-specific qualitative lens that explains how students connect present hardships with growth, family hope, and future mobility.

The study contributes to the first-year transition literature by extending stress, coping, and integration perspectives through attention to meaning making in a provincial public university context in the Philippines. In practice, the findings support proactive, culturally responsive, and peer-informed transition support. Although the study is limited to one campus and relies on self-reported accounts, it offers a grounded basis for future longitudinal, comparative, and mixed-methods research on student adjustment and aspirational endurance. The study points to a balanced approach to transition support: recognizing the students' capacity to endure, while ensuring that endurance does not replace timely institutional care.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares there to be no conflicts of interest.

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Appendix 1

Screening Questionnaire

1. How would you describe your first few months as a college student?
2. What academic challenges did you experience during your first semester?
3. What emotional or personal difficulties, if any, did you encounter during the adjustment process?
4. How did you cope with these challenges?
5. Who or what helped you the most during this period?
6. In what ways, if any, do you think these experiences changed you?

Appendix 2

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. Can you tell me more about how you experienced your transition from senior high school to college?
2. What kinds of academic pressure did you face during your first semester?
3. How did these challenges affect you, emotionally or personally?
4. When you encountered difficulties, what did you usually do to cope?
5. Who were the people or groups you relied on most during this time? Why?
6. Did you ever consider seeking help from formal university support services? Why or why not?
7. Looking back, how do you think these experiences influenced your development as a college student?
8. What does enduring these challenges mean to you now?