

Unlocking Board Exam Clues: Best Practices of Regional Topnotchers in the Criminologist Licensure Examination

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences of regional topnotchers in the Criminologists' Licensure Examination from Region 2, Cagayan Valley. It identifies the preparations and characteristics that enabled these individuals to achieve top rankings. Interviews were conducted with five selected participants, who graduated in different years and resided in the region. The study used semi-structured, in-depth interviews to gather information on exam preparation, review strategies, and success factors, followed by qualitative thematic analysis to identify key themes from the participants' quotes. The findings reveal that successful top scorers used key strategies such as goal setting, interest-driven engagement, thorough preparation, and participation in review programs. They also emphasized the importance of physical exercise, balance and efficiency, confidence, and strong faith in God in their review preparation. During their preparation for the board exam, these topnotchers faced financial challenges and significant pressure for various reasons. However, they emphasized the importance of a supportive network, a solid educational foundation, exposure to diverse and progressive learning methods, and intensive training which contributed significantly to their success. Targeted efforts aimed at enhancing these identified strategies and attributes could facilitate the effective adoption of best practices among future exam takers aspiring to emulate their success.

Keywords: Best Practices, Board Exam Clues, Regional Topnotchers

INTRODUCTION

Board exams mark important achievements in a student's academic journey, symbolizing success and opening doors to professional careers. Achieving distinctions like becoming a "regional topnotcher" in the Criminologist Licensure Examination recognizes exceptional dedication and expertise in the licensure process. Criminology, crucial for societal justice, requires licensure exams worldwide to assess aspiring professionals, serving as crucial steps for entry into law enforcement and criminal justice roles. In the Philippines, oversight by the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC) ensures adherence to strict standards set by the Philippine Criminology Profession Act (RA 11131), emphasizing criminology's vital role in national security and justice.

Region II of the Philippines, encompassing diverse provinces in Luzon, reflects national efforts in criminology education. It hosts universities offering comprehensive criminology programs that equip students with essential knowledge, skills, and ethical foundations for careers in the criminal justice system. This educational framework supports global initiatives like the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education, aiming for inclusive education to prepare competent professionals capable of effectively addressing societal challenges (United Nations, 2015). This study aims to investigate the specific preparations and attributes distinguishing regional topnotchers in the Criminologist Licensure Examination. By examining the strategies, challenges, and recommendations of Regional Topnotchers, this study aims to enhance understanding and offer guidance for preparing for the criminologist licensure exam. Several factors influence success in the Criminologist Licensure Examination. According to Dagdag et al. (2017), intensive and

extensive training aligned with effective preparation and key attributes is crucial. Ultimately, this study seeks to advance criminology education and provide practical insights for future professionals.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology employs a qualitative-thematic approach to deeply explore the experiences and perceptions of top-performing candidates in the Criminologist Licensure Examination. This approach is designed to capture rich, detailed narratives through in-depth interviews, providing a nuanced understanding of the factors contributing to their success. A purposive sampling technique was used to select five topnotchers from Region II, Philippines, ensuring a focused and relevant investigation into their preparation strategies and success factors. The study was conducted throughout the 2023-2024 academic year, incorporating both face-to-face and virtual interviews to offer flexibility and accommodate participants' schedules. Data collection was structured around an expert-validated interview guide featuring open-ended questions, which facilitated comprehensive and insightful responses. Follow-up phone interviews were employed to address any ambiguities or seek further elaboration on initial responses. Ethical considerations were rigorously adhered to, ensuring that informed consent, confidentiality, and participant autonomy were prioritized. Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was meticulously carried out to identify key patterns and themes related to successful preparation and achievement in the licensure examination. This approach not only provides a detailed understanding of effective preparation strategies but also contributes valuable insights to the field of criminology education, helping to inform future practices and enhance the preparation process for prospective professionals.

INTERVIEW GUIDE QUESTIONS

Background Of Preparation

1. Can you tell me about your board exam and when you took and passed it?
2. How far in advance did you begin preparing for the board exam?
3. What resources did you find most helpful in your preparation?
 1. How do the Regional Topnotchers prepared in taking the Criminologist Licensure Examination in terms of reviewing strategies and other contributory factors
 2. What are the challenges that you have encountered while preparing for the Criminologists' Licensure Examination?
 3. How do the contributing factors of the Regional Topnotchers affect their achievement?
 4. What are the recommendations do the Regional Topnotchers' to ace the board exam?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses findings from interviews with five regional topnotchers in the Criminologist Licensure Examination from Region II, Philippines, focusing on their preparation strategies. Data were collected through in-person interviews and video calls, each lasting 20 to 25 minutes, chosen due to logistical constraints.

I. Preparations in Taking CLE by Regional Topnotchers

A. Reviewing Strategies

Goal setting. This emerged as a foundational strategy among regional topnotchers preparing for the Criminologist Licensure Examination. Participants emphasized the importance of setting clear and ambitious goals that aligned with their study efforts. One participant succinctly captured this approach, stating, "*Your goal should match the efforts that you invest in order to achieve it* (P2, personal communication, April 8,

2024)." This strategic alignment not only motivated participants but also provided a roadmap for focused preparation aimed at achieving top ranks in the examination, she also mentioned that she has consistently followed Norman Vincent Peale's quote: "Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you'll land among the stars. "This quote encapsulates their belief in aiming high and embracing the potential for positive outcomes, even if initial goals are not fully achieved.

These findings echo Traugott's (2014) research on goal-setting in education, emphasizing its role in enhancing motivation and fostering disciplined study habits. Effective goal setting observed among the participants also builds resilience in tackling academic challenges, such as those encountered in the CLE.

Interest-Driven Engagement with Subjects. Participants attributed much of their success in the CLE to their intrinsic motivation and genuine interest in criminology. They described spending extensive hours reading, watching video lectures, and creating study aids like summarized notes and wall posters. One participant humorously recounted their immersive study approach:

"This is kind of funny. I wrote the lectures on manila paper and posted them to the walls. I read, read, and read. I read the material throughout the day. I don't know how I would've succeeded in taking the CLE without my love for reading (P1, personal communication, April 4, 2024).

Participants' passionate engagement deepened understanding and made studying enjoyable and purposeful. Pradani's (2021) research on intrinsic motivation in education supports this, emphasizing that personal interest enhances learning outcomes. Their active engagement underscores the importance of enjoying and connecting with the material studied, crucial for high performance in licensure exams like the CLE.

Good Reading Comprehension. Strong reading comprehension skills emerged as a cornerstone of effective study habits among the topnotchers. Participants emphasized the significance of comprehension in navigating the complex theoretical frameworks, case studies, and legal principles inherent in criminology. One participant remarked confidently, "*my comprehension is one of my greatest strengths* (P1, personal communication, April 4, 2024)." This proficiency enabled them to extract key information efficiently from textbooks, articles, and review materials, thereby enhancing their ability to critically analyze and apply knowledge during the examination.

Pressley and Allington's (2014) research highlights how strong reading skills improve academic success, crucial for mastering challenging licensure exam content. Participants' robust reading comprehension boosts confidence in tackling complex exam questions effectively.

Early preparation. Top notchers collectively recommend beginning exam preparation early, ideally during college. One participant emphasized, "Upon entering college, you must take it seriously (P3, personal communication, April 11, 2024)." Early preparation allowed participants to thoroughly review and master course material well in advance of the examination date. This proactive approach mitigated time pressure and provided ample opportunity for comprehensive study and revision.

Participants emphasize the benefits of early preparation, resonating with Louis Pasteur's quote, "Chance favors only the prepared mind." Starting early reduces last-minute cramming and boosts confidence for the rigorous CLE. Skreekant (2022) supports this, showing that early preparation enhances understanding and retention of subjects, leading to higher success rates in licensure examinations.

Attending a CLE Review Program. A Participants preparing for the examination found attending structured CLE review programs beneficial. They highlighted access to expert coaching, structured study schedules, and comprehensive review materials tailored to the CLE as key advantages of enrolling in review centers. One participant detailed their experience which this disciplined approach provided participants with a supportive environment conducive to focused learning and effective exam preparation, "From day 1 of review in my review center, I studied every day up to the December 2022 CLE exam (P2, personal communication, April 8, 2024).

Review centers play a crucial role in exam readiness (Tacio, 2014), providing specialized guidance and simulating exam conditions with mock tests. Attending these sessions enhances familiarity and confidence, offering structured learning experiences that supplement college education and prepare participants to excel in the CLE.

B. Contributory Attributes

Physical Exercise. It was highlighted by participants as crucial not only for maintaining physical health but also for enhancing academic performance. Participants emphasized how regular exercise boosted their productivity and mental well-being during intense study periods. As one participant noted, “I exercised because it boosts our productivity (P1, personal communication, April 4, 2024)”. This commitment to physical fitness underscored a holistic approach to preparation, recognizing the interconnectedness of physical and mental fitness in sustaining long study hours and effectively managing stress.

Godman (2014) found that exercise improves cognitive function, aiding in learning and retention of new knowledge. Incorporating exercise into daily routines helped participants enhance concentration and resilience, crucial for navigating exam preparation challenges. This highlights physical exercise as a key strategy among topnotchers, optimizing study efforts and mental endurance.

Balance and Efficiency. Maintaining balance and efficiency in study routines was another hallmark of successful exam preparation cited by topnotchers. They emphasized the importance of adequate sleep and regular breaks to recharge mentally. “I put effort into reviewing, but I also make sure I am well rested because nothing will enter your mind if you are tired in all aspects (P1, personal communication, April 4, 2024)”.

This perspective was echoed by another participant who shared, “*Honestly, I am not a morning person, my brain does not function well if I am lacking sleep* (P2, personal communication, April 8, 2024)”. Emphasizing the need for balance, these insights underscored how breaks and adequate sleep fostered better retention and improved cognitive function, essential for effective learning and exam readiness.

Confidence. This emerged as a pivotal mindset among topnotchers, contributing significantly to their exam success. Participants described a mindset characterized by self-belief and determination, essential for overcoming academic challenges. One participant emphasized, “*Once you believe in yourself, even if nobody else does, you can do everything you want, and you can achieve the dream that you think is impossible*” (P3, personal communication, April 11, 2024).

Another participant shared their personal mantra, “I believed in myself back then, that's why I encourage you to believe in yourself as well, tell yourself you can do it, because I proved to myself that I could do it (P4, personal communication, April 14, 2024)”. This unwavering self-confidence provided resilience and motivation, essential for persevering through the rigorous preparation required for the CLE.

Ahmad (2023) highlights confidence as crucial for academic success, enabling topnotchers to overcome obstacles and maintain motivation during the licensure examination preparation. Their self-assured mindset fostered resilience and determination essential for navigating the exam's complexities.

Strong Faith in God. It was identified as a cornerstone of resilience and perseverance among topnotchers. Participants attributed their success not only to personal effort but also to divine guidance and support. One participant reflected, “I knew I could pass the board exam, it's just simple, because I already had a solid foundation during my college days, in those 4 years, I learned a lot and because of the professors. But you know what, I still didn't stop asking and praying for God's guidance (P1, personal communication, April 4, 2024)”.

One participant highlighted the significance of prayer in their journey, affirming, “Pray every day. Pray for guidance, clarity of mind, a calm heart, and for your goals” (P2, personal communication, April 8, 2024). This spiritual practice provided a sense of peace and purpose, reinforcing their determination to succeed in the Criminologist Licensure Examination (CLE). Integrating faith into their study routines exemplified a holistic approach to preparation, recognizing the role of spiritual well-being in sustaining motivation and resilience.

II. Challenges and Coping Mechanisms

Financial Constraints. Financial limitations emerged as a significant hurdle for many participants in their journey towards board exam success. One participant shared their experience, highlighting the impact of poverty on their preparation:

“We are living in poverty; I cannot afford to enroll in a private review center, but I cannot afford to fail my parents any further. That is why, even if I did self-review before, I invested a lot of effort. I always think that I want to make my parents proud and give them the life they always desired (P1, personal communication, April 4, 2024).

This participant's determination to succeed despite financial constraints reflects a deep sense of responsibility towards their family. The inability to afford private review centers necessitated self-review efforts, underscoring their resilience and motivation to achieve academic excellence. Such stories emphasize the intrinsic motivation and familial support that drive individuals to overcome financial obstacles and strive towards their goals. This determination not only propelled them through challenging circumstances but also strengthened their resolve to achieve their aspirations.

Pressure. Participants cited significant pressure associated with preparing for the board exam. One participant described the mental strain caused by academic pressure, stating, “*I was always anxious and highly pressured. This is one of the challenges I faced when I was reviewing because when the mind is in distress, it affects your focus, and therefore your retention of knowledge* (P2, personal communication, April 8, 2024).” This underscores the negative impact of stress and anxiety on cognitive function, potentially hindering effective study habits and information retention. The pressure to excel in the board exam compounded these challenges, emphasizing the importance of coping strategies to manage stress and maintain focus during critical study periods.

Participants also navigated additional pressures, including familial expectations and the introduction of a new curriculum under Republic Act 11131. One participant mentioned, “*We are the pioneers of the new curriculum, RA 11131. Especially on those new subjects, I have no idea where I could get any review materials* (P5, personal communication, April 15, 2024).” This highlighted concerns about access to review materials and unfamiliar exam formats, intensifying the pressure to perform well. To address these challenges, participants utilized mindfulness, breaks, and relaxation techniques to enhance mental and emotional well-being. They adapted their learning strategies, sought support from peers and mentors, and collaborated with classmates and professors, leveraging online resources to effectively navigate the new curriculum. These adaptive measures demonstrated their resilience and proactive approach to overcoming academic challenges.

III. Factors Affecting the Achievement of Regional Topnotchers

Good Support System. Regional topnotchers attribute their academic success to a strong support system including mentors, family, and peers, which sustains motivation and resilience during challenging study periods such as licensure exam preparation. Participants emphasized their families' crucial role in providing consistent encouragement and emotional support. One participant remarked that “*The endless support of my family allowed me to focus and perform well* (P2, personal communication, April 8, 2024).”

Additionally, friendships and peer relationships were instrumental as they fostered collaborative study environments where knowledge sharing and mutual support flourished. Another participant shared, “*I've been teaming up with my friends not just for studying but also for hosting sharing sessions, promoting deeper comprehension, and strengthening our camaraderie* (P3, personal communication, April 11, 2024).”

Such positive interactions not only enhanced comprehension of complex topics but also strengthened camaraderie, further reinforcing their determination to excel. Overall, a strong support system serves as a cornerstone for regional topnotchers, nurturing their academic growth and fortifying their resolve to achieve excellence.

Solid Foundation in College. A strong college education significantly contributes to the success of regional topnotchers in licensure exams. Participants credited their alma mater for rigorous academic training and guidance. For instance, graduates from institutions like Isabela State University highlighted how their education provided essential knowledge, critical thinking skills, and problem-solving abilities crucial for exam success. One participant expressed, *"I knew I could pass the board exam, it is just simple because I already had a solid foundation during my college days. In those four years, I learned a lot because of the professors"* (P1, personal communication, April 4, 2024)

Adhering to teachings from dedicated professors built confidence and competence, empowering them to navigate board exams with assurance. These foundations foster subject-specific expertise and promote a mindset of continuous learning and academic excellence.

Diverse Learning. Regional topnotchers benefit from diverse learning experiences, including exposure to various educational methods and resources. Engaging with multiple review centers broadens their understanding of exam topics and improves proficiency through different teaching approaches. One participant explained, *"I enrolled in two review centers in order to learn it from a new perspective (P2, personal communication, April 8, 2024)."*

This proactive approach enriches preparation and fosters adaptable learning strategies crucial for professional growth. By engaging with diverse study materials and perspectives, candidates gain comprehensive insights and refine cognitive skills essential for effective problem-solving and decision-making in their careers. Embracing diverse learning opportunities empowers regional topnotchers to excel in licensure examinations and beyond, establishing them as skilled professionals in their field.

Progressive Learning. The journey of regional topnotchers towards academic excellence is underpinned by progressive learning strategies that encompass the mastery of cognitive skills essential for professional success. Participants underscored the importance of rigorous academic environments that emphasize memorization, analysis, synthesis, and application of knowledge. One participant highlighted:

"I appreciate the strict academic environment of my alma mater, ISU Cauayan, which greatly contributed to my effective study habits. The university emphasizes skills such as memorization, analysis, comprehension, and application, preparing students well for board exams. Being part of ISU Cauayan, known for its high board exam passing rates, I feel lucky to have had the opportunity to study there (P5, personal communication, April 15, 2024)."

Institutions like ISU Cauayan are recognized for their rigorous academic standards, which cultivate discipline and meticulous study habits essential for exam readiness. These environments not only foster deep subject understanding but also refine critical thinking skills crucial for solving complex professional challenges. Integration of Bloom's taxonomy principles supports educators in nurturing intellectual growth, from foundational knowledge to advanced cognitive skills. These progressive methodologies not only prepare regional topnotchers for licensure exams but also equip them with competencies vital for sustained professional excellence.

IV. Recommendations by the Regional Topnotchers

Proper Mind-setting. A critical aspect highlighted by regional topnotchers is the necessity of cultivating a proper mindset for success in board exams. One participant emphasized *"If you want to really ace the board exam, you only have to have proper mind-setting to set clear goals that will help you stay motivated and concentrated throughout your preparation (P1, personal communication, April 4, 2024)"*

Embracing a growth mindset fosters positivity and equips candidates to navigate challenges with resilience and determination. Dweck's research (2018) supports this approach, indicating that a growth mindset, which believes abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work, correlates with higher academic achievement. Adopting this mindset enhances learning experiences and maximizes potential for success.

Sustainable Reading. Effective preparation requires a combination of thorough and sustained reading practices, which enhance comprehension, retention, and critical thinking skills. Participants underscored the importance of early and consistent engagement with study materials: "*Read and read as many times as you can. You don't have to memorize. You just familiarize yourself with and learn to read; just read and read* (P4, personal communication, April 14, 2024)."

This approach promotes both thorough preparation and incorporates well-being practices like regular exercise and sufficient rest, fostering a balanced study routine that enhances performance. According to Whitten, Labeff, and Tingstrom (2016), maintaining consistent reading habits enhances critical thinking skills across different subjects, underscoring the importance of ongoing learning in preparing for exams.

Aim High. Setting ambitious goals is a key recommendation from regional topnotchers. By aiming beyond passing grades, candidates are motivated to strive for excellence and maintain dedication to their studies. One participant advised: "*You know, if your target is more than just passing the board exam, it will really help you to strive harder. So, aim high for future RCrimS*" (P2, personal communication, April 8, 2024).

Knoop (2023) supports this notion, highlighting that ambitious goals not only inspire individuals to surpass perceived limits but also foster personal growth and development. By setting high expectations for oneself, aspiring criminologists can channel their efforts toward continuous improvement and achievement of their full potential.

Active Engagement in Group Study. Active participation in group study sessions was emphasized as a beneficial practice for enhancing exam preparation. Collaborative learning environments facilitate knowledge exchange, clarification of concepts, and exposure to diverse perspectives. Participants shared their experiences, "*Another important thing is to have friends that you can review with* (P3, personal communication, April 11, 2024)."

Active participation in group study not only enhances understanding but also boosts motivation and accountability among peers, creating a supportive academic community. Youngren (2021) emphasizes that active engagement in group study correlates positively with academic success, improving learning outcomes and readiness for challenging examinations.

Double the Effort and Be Confident. Consistent effort and self-confidence were identified as essential components of successful exam preparation. Participants emphasized the importance of dedication and belief in one's abilities "*Do everything that you can so you won't have regrets in the end*" (P4, personal communication, April 14, 2024). The participant recommends increasing daily vocabulary learning to gain a competitive edge and improve chances of success, especially for those aspiring to be regional topnotchers. Brown (2020) highlights that self-confidence, built through persistent effort and practice, is essential for academic and emotional success. By adopting rigorous study habits and a positive mindset, aspiring criminologists can enhance their readiness and resilience in preparing for board exams.

Sustained Faith. The integration of spiritual practices and faith in oneself emerged as a supportive factor during exam preparation. Participants recommended: "*Always pray to God, always believe in yourself, and manifest good results* (P4, personal communication, April 14, 2024)" (P4, personal communication, April 14, 2024). He recommended that incorporating prayer and other spiritual rituals into one's study routine is perceived as beneficial for success in the licensure examination. It highlights the significance of combining spiritual practices and unwavering self-belief. Ndozie (2020) highlights the role of faith in fostering resilience and holistic well-being during academic pursuits, emphasizing its positive impact on motivation and perseverance.

CONCLUSION

Aspiring exam takers might find great inspiration in the inspiring path of regional top scorers who achieved remarkable scores on the Criminologists' Licensure Examination (CLE). This journey reveals a road map to success.

The achievements of these topnotchers highlight the importance of preserving one's physical and mental well-being and coordinating objectives with early, focused efforts. They emphasize the need to establish realistic yet challenging goals early in college to set yourself up for success. Their commitment to lifelong learning and overlearning highlights the critical role that ongoing education plays in fostering human development. They faced difficulties like pressure and financial limitations, but they overcame them with fortitude, optimistic attitudes, and useful coping strategies like exercise and support from loved ones. A solid educational basis, social networks, and an attitude of tenacity and self-belief all contributed to their success. This emphasizes how important it is to take a balanced approach that incorporates mental and emotional health with academic rigor.

The experiences of regional criminologists' licensure examination champions provide future test takers with invaluable motivation and direction. Their experiences highlight the transformative potential of resilience, willpower, and overall wellbeing in attaining academic achievement. Prospective criminologists can overcome obstacles, realize their full potential, and set themselves up for success in the field of criminology and beyond by firmly adhering to these principles. Achievement is possible if one strives with purpose.

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