

Life Hurdles and Academic Gaps: Exploring the Preceding Hardships and Challenges of Irregular 3rd Year Computer Engineering Students

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ABSTRACT

This research paper investigates the daily life challenges and educational deficiencies experienced by the irregular third-year Computer Engineering students at Bulacan State University – Main Campus. The study focuses on exploring the institutional, personal, and instructional factors which led the irregular students to their current academic status. The researchers used a Mixed Methods Convergent Parallel Design based on Tinto's Student Integration Model and related theories which study stress and coping and constructive alignment. The researchers conducted total enumeration, also known as universal sampling, which included twenty-three (23) irregular third-year Computer Engineering students from all three (3) sections. The researchers collected data through a validated structured questionnaire that included a five-point Likert scale and open-ended responses. The results revealed that academic difficulties were mostly caused by institutional elements which included tight class schedules, difficult subject content, limited laboratory facilities, insufficient academic advising, and frequent system errors. Academic performance was also strongly influenced by personal and external factors which included family problems, poor time management, financial constraints, health-related issues, and mental health challenges. The students' learning experiences were also affected by instructional-related concerns which included limited consultation opportunities and instructors' unclear explanations. The findings in this research demonstrate that irregular status comes from multiple factors which include institutional barriers, personal hardships and instructional challenges. The study recommends academic advising system improvements together with better institutional support services, increased instructional clarity, development of mental health, and student support programs which will help students stay enrolled and achieve academic success.

Keywords: Irregular Students, Computer Engineering Education, Tinto's Student Integration Model, Learning Experiences, Student Support Program

INTRODUCTION

Irregular students are individuals who do not follow the academic program designed for them for various reasons. These can be categorized into personal factors, involving the student's life or family, and academic factors, which involve the institution. For example, they have a failed grade which requires them to retake the subject and they cannot simply enroll in the prerequisite subjects of their failed subject. Research findings show the difficulty is increased for those who study irregularly in both academic and personal aspects compared to those who are studying regularly. Learners face three main obstacles in academics: they face conflicts in schedule, they are unable to communicate properly with others, and they have the emotion of being left out or being lonely, which creates a negative impact on any individual experiencing these hurdles, especially on their education and their psychological health (Garcia & Uy, 2025; Khanal, 2019).

Studies show that the students' attendance behavior and their educational performance along with their academic involvement are affected by their student status. The research shows that students who attend class more often have a better grade or academic outcome compared to students who frequently skip or miss class (Khanal, 2019). Irregular students that differ from learners who study regularly encounter three main challenges: they have a hard time with time management, they feel social isolation, and they feel stressed that forms an obstacle,

hindering them from obtaining their goals and robbing them of their success and good health (Garcia & Uy, 2025).

The research aims to: 1) Evaluate the adaptive capacity, social belonging, and performance outcomes of third-year Computer Engineering Students studying at Bulacan State University - Main Campus while dealing with social alienation. The researchers intended to use the School of Thought and Practice (SOTP) framework to analyze how academic and personal factors affect irregular status. The goal is to understand how these students act when faced with these challenges while seeking support. 2) Study how individuals experience academic irregularities and what systems create academic irregularities to formulate solutions based on the data gathered by the researchers. The study intends to understand the gap between perception and actual experience. This insight will help in developing interventions to aid future learners and remove stereotypes surrounding irregular students.

Objectives of the Study

1. To find out the extent of university-related factors such as portal system issues, scheduling conflicts, and availability of resources that affect regularity.
2. To find out the extent of life hurdles such as financial issues, family concerns, and emotional issues that affect regularity.
3. To find out the perceptions of students regarding teaching pace, course complexity, and alignment of assessments with course instruction.
4. To provide information that could be used by university administrators and the college department in addressing issues concerning irregular students.

Significance of the Study

The study holds relevance and will benefit the following:

To the Irregular Computer Engineering Students. This study can help them understand what is affecting their performance and encourage them to find ways on how they could improve their performance and study habits.

To the Parents and Guardians. This will provide them with a deeper insight into the complexities and struggles that their children go through, both in and out of the academy's influence.

To the Faculty. The findings of this study can help them improve on how they handle and deal with their students who are having difficulties.

To the Institution. This study can help the institution identify areas where improvements can be made in the academic systems, facilities, and services to improve student performances and retention.

To Future Researchers. This study can be used as a basis for further studies related to academic problems and institutional gaps in similar settings.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Relevant Theories

Tinto's Student Integration Model (Vincent Tinto, 1975). Tinto's Student Integration Model explains student retention and academic success through the degree of integration into a university's social and academic systems. The model suggests that students enter college with "pre-entry attributes" such as family background and prior skills, but their persistence is influenced by Academic Integration (grades, intellectual development) and Social Integration (peer and faculty support).

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Richard S. Lazarus & Susan Folkman, 1984) illustrates a transactional relationship between the person and their environment that produces stress. The individual has two processes for assessing whether or not the situation (stressor) is threatening to them (these processes are termed primary appraisal and secondary appraisal). The primary appraisal is an evaluation of the potential of the

situation to be harmful and the secondary appraisal includes determining whether the person has the necessary resources to cope with potential harm.

Theory of Constructive Alignment (John Biggs & Catherine Tang, 2011). The Constructive alignment theory states that the alignment of teaching strategies, assessments and learning outcomes produces successful learning experiences. If an exam is given that is much harder than what was taught, or not related to the material covered in class, it will slow down the learning process, decrease performance and may cause the student to repeat a year.

Related Literature

Local

Lived Experiences of Irregular Students in Private Higher Education Institution (Garcia & Uy, 2025). This study discussed the academic and personal experiences of irregular students in private colleges. The researchers found out that irregular students experience delay in their studies due to failed subjects, financial problems, and personal matters that eventually affect their emotional well-being. It was also noted that irregular students often feel isolated and less confident in their academic abilities. This study is related to the present research because it shows that irregular students commonly experience both academic and life challenges, which may also apply to irregular third-year Computer Engineering students.

Challenges Faced by Irregular Students (Comba et al., 2025). This article focused on the struggles of irregular students in handling their academic responsibility along with their personal obligations. The researchers showed that irregular students happen to experience higher levels of stress because of incomplete subjects and extended years in college. It was also mentioned that irregular students may possibly develop lower academic confidence compared to regular students. This related literature supports the present study by showing that being irregular is not just a status but a condition that may affect students' academic performance over time.

International

Irregular Attendance of University Students and Its Relation to Academic Achievement (Khanal, 2019). This article discussed how academic stress can impact the emotional and psychological state of students. The results showed that excessive stress can cause anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and poor performance. Academic stress highlighted the importance of the support system in helping the students cope with academic pressures. The study also shows how work responsibility and lack of motivation as common reasons for absenteeism. This literature is relevant to the present study because irregular Computer Engineering students may experience schedule conflicts and attendance issues that affect their academic performances.

Predicting academic performance in first-year engineering students: The role of stress, resiliency, student engagement, and growth mindset. (Tormon et al., 2023). This study explored academic school works and time pressure effects on an engineering student. The study showed that academic workloads and academic support can lead students to stress and decreased motivational levels. If students encounter academic pressure, they might experience performance difficulty. This study is related to the present research because students who are irregular in Computer Engineering might encounter academic pressure, and it might lead them to academic gaps.

Fostering psychological wellbeing and student engagement in higher education through positive psychological capital: The mediating role of academic stress (Gebregergis et al., 2023). This literature reveals how academic stress can affect the emotional and psychological state of students. The results showed that excessive stress can cause anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and poor performance. Academic stress highlighted the importance of the support system in helping the students cope with academic pressures. This literature supports the current research by reaffirming that psychological factors may also influence the academic performance of irregular students.

Learning Difficulties And Loneliness in College and Beyond (Icekson et al., 2021). According to this literature, students' academic performance can also be influenced by external factors such as family responsibilities, financial concerns, and other personal circumstances. The study highlighted that students who experience problems outside school are more likely to struggle academically. This literature is relevant to the present research because it supports the idea that life hurdles outside the classroom may contribute to academic gaps among irregular students.

Related Studies

Perceived Factors That Affect Students’ Academic Performance Nazir et al. (2022) Investigated personal and external factors that influence students’ academic performance. The personal factors included lifestyle factors such as whether students drank alcohol on weekdays and weekends, socializing with friends and having free time after school. The external factor included the education level of students’ parents. The investigation was meant to find out which factor influences academic performance and how family and personal factors contribute to academic performance.

Identifying Key Factors Affecting Academic Failure among Mechanical Engineering Students at NEUST. Pernia and others (2026) considered various reasons why mechanical engineering students experienced academic failure at NEUST. The mechanical engineering program is known for its extremely difficult curriculum and heavy course loads, which this study set out to identify as potential reasons for academic difficulties. Finding the most common factors contributing to students’ academic failures, such as question validity/complexity of content and the amount of study time/resources offered, was very important to help address the high number of mechanical engineering students who fail each semester.

Unravelling the Dynamics of Academic Stress: A Conceptual Study of Engineering Students. Brhanu et al. (2022) examined how they respond to academic stress through different aspects of their personality including perfectionist characteristics. The intent was to determine how individual differences contribute to the way that students respond to academic difficulty and ultimately to their academic success. Academic stress was seen as a potential mediator between personality characteristic and academic irregularity.

Undergraduate Students’ Perceptions of Stress and Mental Health in Engineering Culture. Jensen et al. (2023) studied the perceptions of engineering students regarding stress due to their culture and mental health issues. The goal was to identify the major source of stress and strategies for coping, while highlighting how personal, social and environmental factor can influence academic experience.

Constructive Alignment and the Learning Experience. Stamov Roßnagel et al. (2021) evaluates how varying degrees of alignment between teaching methods (teaching) and testing methods could influence student learning and academic performance. As part of this study, researchers sought to identify the degree to which variations in instructional clarity and consistency across teaching and evaluation methods impacted students’ motivation, frustration and ultimate outcomes.

Conceptual Framework

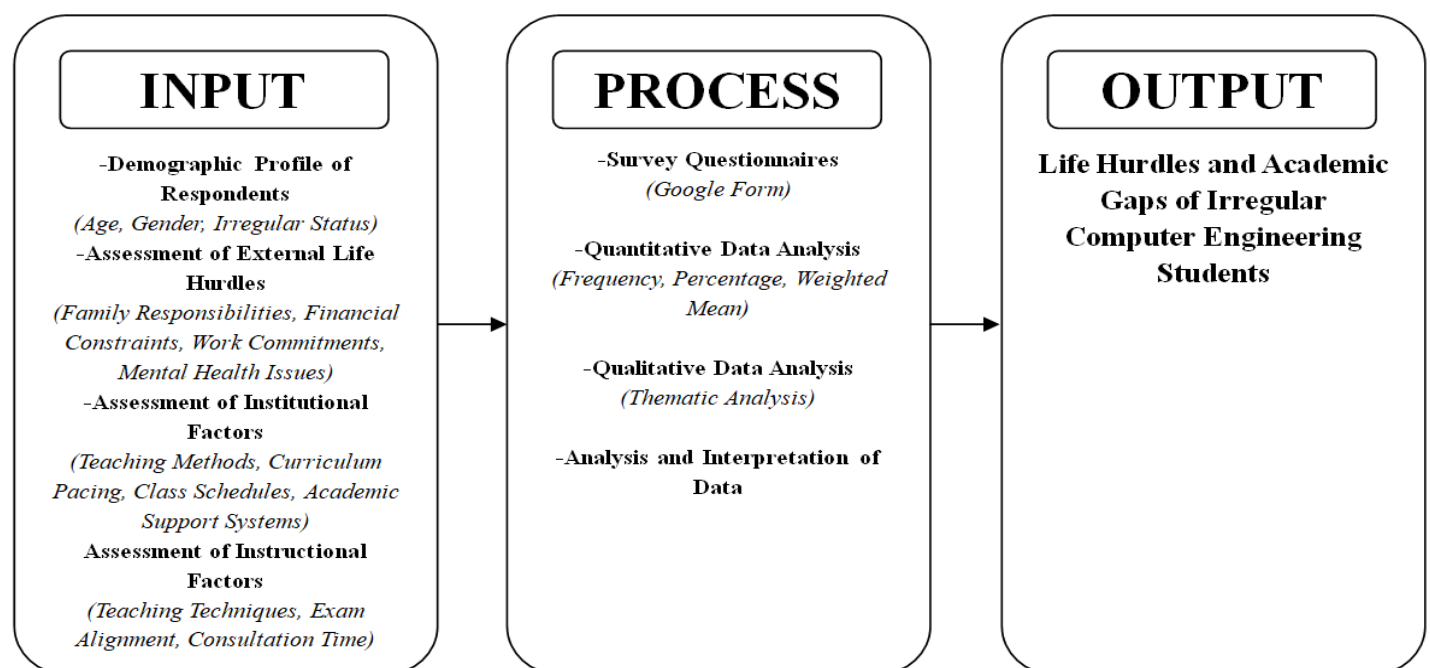


Figure 2.1: Conceptual Model of the Study

Figure 2.1 presents the conceptual framework of the study using the Input-Process-Output (IPO) model. The Input section consists of the demographic profile of the participants, specifically their age, gender, and irregular status, as all respondents are 3rd-year Computer Engineering students. It also includes an assessment of external life hurdles—such as work commitments, financial problems, family responsibilities, and mental health concerns—alongside institutional and instructional factors, including teaching methods, curriculum pacing, class schedules, and academic support systems. The Process involves the distribution of Google Form questionnaires, quantitative analysis through descriptive statistics (frequency, weighted means and percentages), and the deductive thematic coding of qualitative responses. Finally, the Output represents the identified life hurdles and academic gaps, which serve as the basis for the study's conclusions and recommendations.

METHODS

The methodology used in this study is primarily quantitative and descriptive in nature. Specifically, the researchers employed the following approaches:

Research Approach

The study uses a Mixed Methods Research Design, specifically called the Convergent Parallel Design to simultaneously collect and analyze numerical data and detailed answer from the quantitative questions about the preceding life hurdles and academic gaps the third-year irregular computer engineering students

Participants

A Total Enumeration, also known as Universal Sampling was used, and the participants are the 23 third-year irregular computer engineering students from three (3) academic sections in Bulacan State University

Data Collection Instruments

A structured questionnaire created using Google Forms, which facilitated easy and efficient data gathering from the respondents. The instruments included 5-point Likert scales (ranging from 1 to 5) and open-ended questions to capture a holistic view of the respondents' experiences.

Validation

The survey was assessed and validated by a Guidance Office professional and a Computer Engineer instructor, ensuring clarity, relevance, and appropriateness relative to the research objectives.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were statistically analyzed using descriptive statistics, including weighted means, frequency counts, and percentages. For the qualitative data, a Deductive Thematic Analysis was employed. Since the open-ended questions were structured according to the School of Thought and Practice (SOTP) framework, the responses were categorized based on pre-defined themes: institutional, personal, and instructional factors. The best responses using the local language (Tagalog) were translated into English and coded to ensure alignment with these specific framework categories. Finally, both datasets were merged to provide a holistic understanding of the notable effects on students' academic performance.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure the confidentiality and privacy of the respondents, their real names will not be collected at any point in the study. Providing a nickname is optional and will only be used for identification purposes if the respondent chooses to include one. The online survey form will not require any personal, private, or sensitive information of students. All responses will be treated with strict confidentiality and will be used solely for academic purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The respondents provided their nickname, sex, age, and reason for irregular status. The collected information shows that most irregular students cited academic difficulties and scheduling conflicts and financial problems and personal challenges as their main reasons for becoming irregular. The data reveals that irregular status develops through multiple internal and external factors instead of existing because of one specific reason.

Table 1. Demographic of the Irregular Third-Year Computer Engineering Students

Profile Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	20 years old	4	17.39%
	21 years old	15	65.22%
	22 years old	4	17.39%
Gender	Male	10	43.48%
	Female	7	30.43%
	Prefer not to say	6	26.09%
Irregular Status	Failed Subjects	22	95.70%
	Returning Student (LOA)	1	4.30%
Total		23	100%

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the 23 irregular third-year Computer Engineering students. The data reveals that the majority of respondents are 21 years old (65.22%), with the remaining participants evenly distributed between 20 and 22 years of age. In terms of gender distribution, 43.48% identify as male, while 30.43% are female, and 26.09% preferred not to disclose their gender. Notably, the overwhelming primary cause for irregular status among the participants is **failed subjects**, accounting for 95.7% of the total population, which only a single respondent (4.3%) identified as a returning student from a leave of absence. This profile suggests that academic difficulty within the core curriculum is the dominant factor leading to irregularity in this specific batch.

Table 2. Institutional Systems Perceived as Requiring Improvement

5 - Strongly Agree, 4 - Agree, 3 - Neutral, 2 - Disagree, 1 - Strongly Disagree

Description	Weighted Mean	Indicator
Tight class schedule prevented me from understanding the lessons better.	3.91	Agree
The subjects offered in class were difficult to comprehend.	3.74	Agree
Lack of functional laboratory facilities hindered my ability to perform well in my major subjects.	3.60	Agree
Inadequate learning materials made it difficult for me to pass my previous courses.	3.87	Agree
My grades were not recorded due to a technical error during my enrollment.	2.38	Disagree
I received insufficient academic advising regarding which subjects to prioritize, particularly those with prerequisites.	3.60	Agree
Frequent system errors or delays in the university portal made my enrollment process stressful/difficult.	4.17	Agree
I was not clearly oriented about the retention policy (maintaining grades) and the consequences of failing a major subject.	2.87	Neutral
I was unaware of how to schedule an appointment or approach the university Guidance Counselors for my concerns.	3.42	Neutral
Overall Weighted Mean	3.51	Agree

As shown in Table 2, the respondents ‘Agree’ that Institutional and Academic Factors contribute to their irregular status, yielding an overall weighted mean of 3.51. These quantitative results are supported by the qualitative responses gathered from the 23 participants, where data saturation was reached as respondents consistently

identified the same recurring structural barriers. While 7 out of 23 students reported no specific institutional hurdles or provided no response, the majority (16 out of 23) described notable structural barriers. When separating these responses into specific sub-topics, 5 students explicitly highlighted failures in the enrollment portal, and another 5 students pointed to confusing academic advising regarding prerequisites. Furthermore, 4 students reported that tight class schedules and long commutes made it difficult to comprehend complex lessons, while others identified insufficient laboratory resources and rigid policies regarding special subjects as additional barriers. These findings align with the research of Pernia et al. (2026), which established that engineering students face academic failure due to subject difficulty and the specific resource barriers they encounter. Additionally, students achieve different academic outcomes because of the effects that campus infrastructure and environmental conditions have on their learning environment, as indicated by Yue et al. (2025). This reality is heavily validated by the qualitative responses, with one student sharing: *“One specific instance is really the scheduling and enrollment system. As an irregular student, our schedule is not a priority, so it becomes a race for slots. I had a prerequisite subject before, but I ran out of slots because I enrolled late due to a pending clearance issue. Since I couldn't take it that semester, I was delayed for one whole semester. There was also a time when the schedules of two of my required subjects conflicted, and there were no other sections available. It feels like you really have no choice. In the end, I couldn't take one of them, which caused a domino effect on my other subjects. It is not that I couldn't handle the academics, but the system itself is what caused my delay”*.

Table 3. Summary of Weighted Means for Institutional Systems Perceived as Requiring Improvement

5 - Strongly Agree, 4 - Agree, 3 - Neutral, 2 - Disagree, 1 - Strongly Disagree

Questions	Weighted Mean	Indicator
My work responsibilities conflicted with my class hours, leading to dropped or failed subjects.	3.21	Neutral
Personal or family problems greatly affected my focus and attendance in previous semesters.	4.47	Agree
Health-related issues caused me to miss classes or take a leave of absence.	3.87	Agree
My circle of friends or peers influenced my study habits negatively (e.g., cutting classes, gaming).	2.25	Disagree
Financial difficulties forced me to stop schooling or take a reduced academic load.	3.12	Neutral
Poor time management habits contributed to my failing grades in the past.	4.04	Agree
My mental health challenges, such as distress or anxiety, have notably affected my academic performance.	4.21	Agree
Overall Weighted Mean	3.60	Agree

As indicated in Table 3, the respondents 'Agree' that Personal and External Factors affected their academic performance substantially, yielding an overall weighted mean of 3.60. These quantitative findings are strongly supported by the qualitative data, where 22 out of 23 students provided detailed descriptions of the life hurdles they faced, demonstrating that data saturation was reached as respondents consistently identified recurring obstacles. Separating these responses into specific sub-topics reveals that 7 students identified financial constraints as their primary hurdle, while another 7 students described the difficulty of managing work responsibilities alongside their studies. Furthermore, 5 students reported that mental health challenges notably decreased their motivation, while another 5 students cited physical health issues and 5 students highlighted family problems as major distractions. These findings align with the study of Garcia & Uy (2025), who found that irregular students frequently encounter emotional distress driven by financial problems or private matters. Additionally, the results support Icekson et al. (2021), whose research highlights that students experiencing problems outside of school, such as family responsibilities and financial concerns, are more likely to struggle academically. This reality is heavily validated by the qualitative responses, with one student sharing: *“The biggest factor that affected my academic performance was dealing with personal and financial challenges during the semester. I had a hard time focusing, but I tried to manage my time and fix my study habits to keep up with the classes. Unfortunately, I still failed.”*

Table 4. Summary of Weighted Means for Learning Pace and Instructional Effectiveness

5 - Strongly Agree, 4 - Agree, 3 - Neutral, 2 - Disagree, 1 - Strongly Disagree

Questions	Weighted Mean	Indicator
I felt intimidated to ask questions or clarify topics because the instructor was strict or unapproachable.	3.65	Agree
Limited opportunities for consultation with instructors affected my learning.	3.69	Agree
The instructors' explanations were often unclear or difficult to comprehend	3.83	Agree
The instructor did not clearly discuss the course syllabus or the grading system at the start of the semester.	2.65	Neutral
I struggled to adapt to the teaching methods used by my previous instructors.	3.78	Agree
I did not receive timely feedback on my quizzes or exams, so I didn't know I was failing until it was too late.	3.43	Neutral
The exams or assessments covered topics that were not discussed or were much harder than the lessons taught.	4.17	Agree
Overall Weighted Mean	3.60	Agree

As presented in Table 4, the respondents ‘Agree’ that Instructional and Teaching Factors have a notable impact on their academic performance, gaining an overall weighted mean of 3.60. These quantitative findings are strongly supported by the qualitative data, where 20 out of 23 students provided detailed descriptions of how teaching styles and pacing hindered their progress, demonstrating that data saturation was reached regarding these instructional challenges. Separating these responses into specific sub-topics reveals that the most prominent concern was fast pacing, with 12 students explicitly stating that high-speed lectures make it difficult to comprehend and absorb complex engineering materials. Additionally, 10 students highlighted the difficulty of constantly adjusting to different teaching methods or unclear explanations, while 9 students emphasized that a lack of instructor approachability and consideration further impeded their learning progress. This implies that instructional factors, such as misaligned teaching styles and a lack of instructional clarity, contribute to poor academic performance. This finding is strongly supported by the theory of Constructive Alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2011), which posits that high failure rates occur when assessment tasks do not align with teaching activities. Recent study by Stamov Roßnagel et al. (2021) further confirms that when students perceive a misalignment between what is taught and what is tested, they experience higher “learning demands” and frustration, which directly negatively impacts their academic success. This reality is heavily validated by the qualitative responses, with one student sharing: *“As an irregular student, I truly feel the impact of the different teaching styles of the professors this second semester. For the professors who have handled us before, their teaching methods remain almost the same, making the flow of the class somewhat predictable. However, the new professors have different styles, requiring me to adjust to their explanations and the pacing of the lessons. Initially, the lessons were manageable, but as the topics progress and become more difficult, I feel the need to exert even more effort to catch up and understand everything, especially since my schedule and learning pace are different compared to regular students.”*

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The study aimed to assess the impact of the institutional, personal, and instructional factors on the academic performance of the third-year irregular Computer Engineering students. The survey questionnaire was used to gather data from the selected respondents on the major contributors to their academic irregularity. The findings from the data analysis were as follows:

Main Cause of Irregular Status

Most of the respondents who became irregular were due to failing a subject.

Institutional Factors

Institutional factors that were identified as affecting irregular status included frequent system errors, class schedules, insufficient learning materials, and subject difficulties.

Personal and External Factors

Personal and external factors, which included family problems, mental health challenges, health-related issues, and time management, were identified as one of the most influential factors in affecting the academic challenges of the respondents.

Instructional Factors

Instructional factors, which included the mismatch between lessons and tests, unclear explanations, and consultation time, were similarly identified as major contributors to student performance.

Comparative Analysis of Factors

Out of the three major factors that affect irregular status, personal and external factors and instructional factors received the highest rating, followed by institutional factors. This implies that while institutional hurdles are notable, personal and instructional factors actually play a more dominant role in the students' overall academic performance and irregular status.

Limitations of the Study

While this study gives a good look at what irregular students go through, there are a few things to keep in mind. First, we only had 23 participants from one department at Bulacan State University, so these results might not be the same for every engineering student in other schools or regions. Second, the data is based on what the students shared in the surveys, so it represents their own personal views and experiences. For future research, it would be helpful to include more students from different universities to see if these institutional and personal hurdles are common across the country.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The study determined that the irregular status of third-year Computer Engineering students at Bulacan State University - Main Campus is a complex challenge driven by structural inequalities and personal hindrances. Based on the frequency of responses, structural problems particularly in university's portal errors and scheduling conflicts developed a cascade that directly led to academic delays. Whereas, students determined the subject complexity and having a limited laboratory access as a major hurdle, these were worsened by personal factors such as financial limitations and mental health challenges, which respondents indicated as the most impactful factor of their academic struggle.

Moreover, the findings highlight a gap in the instructional process, where the discrepancy between course content and assessments often hindered the students' success. The research proves that irregularity of the students in this batch is not simply a result of student capability but is ingrained in external life challenges and institutional inefficiencies that restrict student progress.

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following suggestions have been put forth:

1. Student portal reliability should be enhanced, class schedules should be adjusted to reduce conflicts, and there should be access to sufficient lab space and materials to bolster the support systems.
2. In order to assist irregular students in managing their needs in a timely manner to avoid delays, there should be enhanced academic advising services to provide timely support to irregular students.
3. In order to resolve issues like family problems and mental health conditions, personal and mental health support can be provided in the form of counseling services, stress management workshops, and seminars on time management.
4. In order to reduce feelings of isolation and to promote overall academic engagement for irregular students, mentorship programs can be implemented to provide opportunities for social integrations.
5. Improve teaching techniques through alignment with tests, proper explanation of course materials, increased possibilities of consulting, and useful criticisms in order to meet students' learning styles.

6. Develop and execute a faculty development program on effective teaching techniques, lesson planning, and student engagement in order to improve the quality of teaching and students' academic performance.

Conflict of Interest

The authors report no potential conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Data Availability

Researchers who wish to view the dataset supporting our findings can contact the corresponding author. We cannot make the raw data completely public in order to maintain the promised confidentiality of our participants' academic information.

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