

Determinants of NSTP Component Selection and Perceptions of the ROTC Program among First-Year Students of Sultan Kudarat State University: A Convergent Mixed-Methods Study

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100500715>

Received: 13 May 2026; Accepted: 19 May 2026; Published: 11 June 2026

ABSTRACT

Only about 16% of first-year students at Sultan Kudarat State University (SKSU) enrol in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps. Most pick the Civic Welfare Training Service; a smaller group takes Literacy Training Service. With a mandatory ROTC bill back before Congress, the question of why so few students choose ROTC voluntarily is not merely academic. This study put it to 515 first-year students through a survey and to roughly two dozen more through five focus groups, one of them with current 4th-class cadets. Three of the five concerns non-cadets reported about ROTC — hazing, equipment cost, and time burden — were rated much more severely by students outside the program than by cadets inside it (all $p < .001$). Two others, heat and discipline, were rated about the same by both. What the cadets themselves chose to talk about was telling: they had plenty to say about how the program is administered, almost nothing to say about hazing, cost, or hours. The single barrier that came up most often, however, was one I had not thought to ask about on the survey at all: simply getting to the Access campus, where ROTC is held, from the satellite campuses where many students actually live. The picture sketched here is one university's. The sample skews toward cadets, so any read of how the broader Philippine first-year cohort feels about ROTC will need data from somewhere else.

Keywords: National Service Training Program, Reserve Officers' Training Corps, mixed-methods research, student perceptions, inclusive program access, Philippine Higher Education, Sultan Kudarat

INTRODUCTION

Republic Act No. 9163, the National Service Training Program Act of 2001, restructured Philippine civic and defense preparedness education by abolishing the previously mandatory Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) and replacing it with three elective components (Republic Act No. 9163, 2001). Under the law and its 2009 implementing rules, students enrolled in baccalaureate and at least two-year technical-vocational programs may choose among the Civic Welfare Training Service (CWTS), the Literacy Training Service (LTS), and ROTC (Commission on Higher Education et al., 2009). The legislative shift away from compulsory military training in higher education followed the death of a cadet at the University of Santo Tomas in 2001, an incident that catalyzed national debate over hazing and abuse within the mandatory program.

Two decades after the reform, ROTC enrolment in Philippine higher education institutions has not recovered. Aggregate Commission on Higher Education (CHED) figures across the period 2002 to 2012 indicate that, of approximately 12.6 million students who completed an NSTP component, roughly 11% selected ROTC, while CWTS accounted for the overwhelming majority. The decline coincides with two related concerns. First, the historical legislative justification for moving away from a mandatory regime included the observation that the Armed Forces of the Philippines absorbed only a small fraction of ROTC graduates produced annually, raising questions about the program's downstream contribution to actual reserve readiness. Second, NSTP implementation across Philippine state universities has been uneven, with documented concerns about assessment fairness, curricular substance, and the gap between program intent and program reality (Saban & Saban, 2020; Bagundol et al., 2023; Pasion et al., 2024).

The mandatory ROTC question has returned to legislative prominence. The 19th Congress passed House Bill No. 6687 on third reading in December 2022, proposing to replace the elective NSTP framework with a mandatory National Citizens Service Training Program (House of Representatives, 2022). Senate Bill No. 2034, the Mandatory ROTC Act, remains pending and was elevated to legislative priority status in 2024. At the same time, recent Philippine empirical work has documented stakeholder ambivalence: senior high school students rate ROTC favorably on physical and psychological development but less favorably on knowledge dimensions (Bagundol et al., 2023); local college and university stakeholders in Tarlac report mixed sentiment regarding mandatory implementation (Dianga, 2023); and parents express qualified support, conditional on safety guarantees (Itorralba, 2023).

Within this contested policy environment, the empirical question of why students choose CWTS, LTS, or ROTC under conditions of free choice has direct bearing on whether mandatory imposition is justified, on what reforms might increase voluntary uptake, and on what assumptions about student perceptions are well-founded. Sultan Kudarat State University (SKSU), a state university serving the Region XII catchment of Sultan Kudarat province, offers a useful case: it operates multiple campuses (Access main campus, Tacurong, Isulan, Bagumbayan, Lutayan, Kalamansig), it recruits from a province with established military and police career interest, and yet it reports first-year ROTC enrolment of only approximately 16%. The mismatch between expressed career interest and program enrolment provides analytic leverage for examining the determinants of the decision. The same data also speak to a question of inclusion: whether the depressed enrolment reflects students who do not want to participate, or students who are systematically prevented from participating by geographic, physical, gender-based, or course-program-based barriers. The distinction is consequential, because the two readings imply different reforms — promotional repositioning in the first instance, structural removal of access barriers in the second.

This study had four objectives, each tied to a distinct analytical question. The first was to determine the primary factors influencing student preferences in NSTP component selection. The second was to assess student perceptions of the ROTC program and identify concerns that are overestimated relative to cadet self-reported experience — operationally, concerns rated significantly higher by non-ROTC students than by enrolled cadets — for which the shorthand “misconception” is used in some passages for readability. The third was to formulate data-driven strategies for promoting ROTC enrolment that distinguish between overestimated concerns (addressable through communications) and confirmed concerns (requiring operational reform). The fourth was to provide actionable recommendations for enhancing the broader NSTP experience, including the CWTS and LTS components.

METHODS

Research Design

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Greene et al., 1989). In this design, quantitative and qualitative data are collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and integrated at the interpretation stage. The design is appropriate when the research question requires both breadth — to characterize the magnitude and direction of patterns across a population — and depth, to explain the mechanisms producing those patterns and to surface concerns that the survey instrument may not anticipate (O’Cathain et al., 2010). Integration was achieved through a joint-display strategy following Fetter et al. (2013) and Guetterman et al. (2015), in which each survey factor or perception item was triangulated with the corresponding qualitative theme and a verdict — convergent, divergent, or emergent — was recorded.

Setting and Participants

Data were collected at SKSU campuses in April 2026. The study population comprised first-year students enrolled in any NSTP component at the Access main campus, Tacurong campus, and Isulan campus. Recruitment proceeded through a non-probability convenience procedure facilitated by the SKSU NSTP Office. Campus NSTP coordinators forwarded a self-administered Google Form to NSTP class group chats and shared the survey link during regular Saturday NSTP sessions, where ROTC cadets, CWTS sections, and

LTS sections all assemble; the form remained open for approximately three weeks. Participation was voluntary and uncompensated, and respondents were informed at the start of the form that completion implied consent. A total of 515 valid responses were obtained, distributed across NSTP component as ROTC ($n = 174$, 33.8%), CWTS ($n = 305$, 59.2%), and LTS ($n = 36$, 7.0%). Because no master roster of enrolled first-year NSTP students was available at the time of data collection, a precise response rate cannot be reported, and the sample should be understood as a convenience sample rather than a probability sample of the first-year population.

The realized sample overrepresents ROTC respondents (33.8% of the survey) relative to the SKSU first-year population estimate of approximately 16% ROTC enrolment. Cadets concentrate at the same Saturday training venue and were therefore easier to contact through a single shared channel, whereas CWTS and LTS students disperse across departmental sections served by separate coordinators. Two analytic consequences follow. First, group comparisons that condition on NSTP component (the Kruskal–Wallis and Mann–Whitney tests reported below) are unaffected by the imbalance, because they compare within each subgroup rather than across the pooled sample. Second, any whole-sample descriptive statistic (for example, the percentage of the entire sample reporting a given concern) cannot be read as a population estimate without post-stratification weighting against the SKSU NSTP enrolment distribution; no such weighting was applied in the present analysis, and whole-sample percentages are accordingly reported as sample descriptors only. Conclusions in this paper are framed as patterns observed in this sample rather than as population-level claims about SKSU or the Philippine NSTP cohort.

Qualitative data were collected through five sessions: four focus group discussions with CWTS or LTS students drawn from College of Nursing (Access campus), Computer Engineering (Isulan campus), Agriculture (Access campus), and a mixed-degree group at the Tacurong campus, and one session with 4th-class (first-year) ROTC cadets at the Access main campus that the SKSU NSTP Director joined midway. The hybrid character of the fifth session — cadet voice for approximately the first two-thirds, key informant interview thereafter — was preserved analytically by segmenting the transcript at the point of the Director's arrival.

Instruments

The survey instrument comprised three parts. Part A presented nine factors potentially influencing component selection — peer influence, schedule convenience, financial cost, physical demands, course alignment, perceived safety from disciplinary action, personal development, family recommendation, and program reputation — each rated on a four-point Likert scale (4 = strong influence, 1 = no influence). Part B asked respondents to identify the three factors that most influenced their final choice in rank order. Part C presented nine statements about ROTC — four describing positive perceptions (leadership development, patriotism, disaster response skills, employment advantage) and five describing concerns (physical exhaustion, strict discipline, hazing risk, financial requirements, time burden) — rated on a four-point agreement scale. The four-point scale, omitting a neutral midpoint, was selected to reduce the central-tendency bias common in Filipino survey contexts.

The focus group discussion guide contained four open-ended prompts: the registration-day decision moment; the principal dealbreaker against ROTC; the rumours circulating among seniors about ROTC and CWTS; and what specific changes or incentives would prompt reconsideration. A parallel cadet-side guide (administered to the 4th-class ROTC cadets) inverted the framing, asking about pre-enrolment fears versus post-enrolment lived experience and what cadets would say to convince a freshman to enrol. All instruments were administered in a mixture of Hiligaynon, Tagalog, and English consistent with multilingual conversational practice in the SKSU catchment.

Data Pre-Processing

Survey data were cleaned through a multi-stage protocol. The forced-rank text answers were encoded back to factor numbers; degree program names were standardized and grouped into eight college clusters; one Part C item that had been duplicated in the form was consolidated as the mean of the two responses (8.7% of respondents disagreed with themselves on the duplicate, providing an internal-consistency check). Eight

quality flags were computed at the response level: straight-lining in Part A, straight-lining in Part C, joint straight-lining, forced-rank duplication, two range-check flags, a Part A versus Part B logical-inconsistency flag, and the Part C duplicate-disagreement flag. No respondents were excluded; all flags were retained as binary variables to support sensitivity analyses.

Focus group transcripts were anonymized at the speaker level using stable session-and-role codes (e.g., S2_CE_ISL::STU-P3 designating Student Participant 3 in the Computer Engineering Isulan session); each turn was tagged with a primary language label (Hiligaynon, Tagalog, English, or mixed); and a first-pass set of a priori codes was applied through a keyword-rule procedure derived from the research objectives, with three additional codes — Cadet Lived Experience, ROTC Assessment Rigor, and Institutional Knowledge (Cadet) — added inductively after the first reading of the cadet session.

Quantitative Analysis

Likert items were treated as ordinal data, and rank-based non-parametric procedures were used throughout. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, percentage distributions) were computed for each Part A and Part C item overall and disaggregated by NSTP component. Differences across the three NSTP groups were tested with Kruskal-Wallis H tests (Kruskal & Wallis, 1952), reported as H with two degrees of freedom and exact p value where computable. Rank-based methods were selected because Likert responses are ordinal and the within-group distributions exhibit ceiling clustering near scale value 4, which violates the normality assumption underlying ANOVA; rank methods make no distributional assumptions beyond exchangeability under the null hypothesis. Effect size was estimated by epsilon-squared and interpreted using the conventional thresholds reported in Tomczak and Tomczak (2014): small ($< .06$), medium ($.06$ to $< .14$), and large ($\geq .14$). For Part A items returning a significant omnibus Kruskal-Wallis result at $\alpha = .05$, pairwise group differences were examined with Dunn's post-hoc test (Dunn, 1964) using Bonferroni correction to control the family-wise error rate across the three pairwise comparisons per item. Cross-method agreement between the rated-influence (Part A) and forced-rank (Part B) measurements of the same nine factors was assessed using Spearman's rank correlation coefficient with its associated two-tailed p value.

For Part C, two indices were constructed from the item-level data: a Benefits Index (mean of items C1–C4) and a Concerns Index (mean of items C5–C9). Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951), with the threshold $\alpha \geq .70$ interpreted following Tavakol and Dennick (2011). The concern-gap analysis was operationalized as a one-tailed Mann-Whitney U test (Mann & Whitney, 1947) for each of the five concern items, comparing CWTS-and-LTS respondents ($n = 341$) against ROTC cadets ($n = 174$). The directional hypothesis — that non-cadets would rate the concern higher than cadets — was specified before data inspection and tested at $\alpha = .05$. For each item, the U statistic, the standardized z , the one-tailed p value, and the rank-biserial effect size $r = z / \sqrt{N}$ are reported in the Results section (see Figure 3 and accompanying narrative). Because five concern items were tested, results should be interpreted with awareness of multiplicity; only items returning $p < .01$ are described as “clearly significant” in the narrative, providing an informal Bonferroni-style buffer (per-comparison α of .01 holds the family-wise rate at approximately .05 across five tests). For analytical purposes, the descriptor “overestimated concern relative to cadet self-reported experience” is used in preference to the shorter term “misconception,” which carries an empirical claim about the underlying program features that the present design cannot evaluate. The shorter term is used parenthetically in some passages for readability; the operational meaning throughout is the descriptive statistical pattern of higher non-cadet ratings against lower cadet ratings on the same item. All tests were performed using SciPy 1.17 in Python.

Qualitative Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed through the six-phase reflexive thematic analysis procedure described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021). Phase 1 consisted of repeated readings of each transcript in its original code-switched form (Hiligaynon, Tagalog, and English mixed at the speaker level), with English glosses prepared for any passage where the meaning was not transparent to a Tagalog-fluent reader. Phase 2 generated initial codes through a hybrid procedure: a priori codes derived from the four study objectives and from the Part A and Part C survey items were applied first to ensure direct comparability with the quantitative findings, and

inductive codes were added when transcript material raised themes the survey instrument had not anticipated. Phases 3 and 4 grouped codes into candidate themes and tested those themes against the full dataset for internal coherence and external distinctiveness. Phase 5 defined and named the final themes; Phase 6 produced the analytical narrative reported in the Results section.

All coding was performed by the sole author. Code application was assisted by an initial pass of keyword-based rule matching against a researcher-developed code dictionary, followed by manual review and refinement of every coded turn. The full coded dataset, including session metadata, turn-level speaker codes, language tags, word counts, and a priori plus inductive code assignments, is documented in a preprocessing workbook that serves as an audit trail for the analysis. Three inductive codes were added during analysis after the cadet focus group session was correctly classified: CADET_LIVED_EXPERIENCE (cadet observations of the program from inside), ROTC_ASSESSMENT_RIGOR (cadet and Director references to the annual practical inspection as a feature that resists attendance gaming), and INSTITUTIONAL_KNOWLEDGE_CADET (cadet participants supplying enrolment counts and implementer staffing details).

Researcher positionality requires disclosure because reflexive thematic analysis treats the analyst's position as part of the interpretive frame rather than as a source of bias to be eliminated (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The sole author is a serving officer in the Philippine Army Reserve Command (Battalion Commander, 12th Reserve Community Defense Group), with institutional involvement in ROTC delivery at SKSU and a professional interest in addressing the depressed enrolment described in the Introduction. This position confers two analytic resources — access to participants who might be cautious with a civilian researcher, and the institutional knowledge required to interpret references to NSTP administration — and one analytic risk, namely a predisposition toward findings that frame outsider resistance to ROTC as correctable rather than as principled disagreement with the program. Three procedural safeguards were applied to manage this risk. First, the qualitative coding scheme included codes for negative cadet experience (DEALBREAKER_HAZING_DISCIPLINE, LIVED_EXP_ROT) that could in principle have surfaced findings unfavorable to the program; the absence of such findings is reported as a finding rather than treated as confirmation. Second, the “argument from absence” reading of the cadet voice is explicitly stated as an interpretive move rather than as direct evidence, allowing readers to evaluate its force independently. Third, the moderated language in the Discussion section's treatment of the mandatory ROTC question reflects an attempt to constrain the policy implications to what the data can support, given the author's institutional interest.

The credibility checks conducted, and those not conducted, are disclosed in full to allow informed evaluation of the analysis. Conducted: a coded audit trail documenting every turn, speaker, language, and assigned code is preserved as a preprocessing workbook; thick description of the FGD sessions, including campus, college, language mode, and number of speakers, is provided so that readers can assess transferability to other settings; verbatim quotations in the original Hiligaynon-Tagalog-English code-switched form are reported alongside English glosses to allow bilingual readers to evaluate gloss adequacy; and analytical claims based on the qualitative material are paired with the survey evidence at each step through the joint display rather than allowed to stand independently. Not conducted: member checking with participants was not performed because the FGD sessions were one-off encounters and participants' contact information was not collected; second-coder review with Cohen's kappa (Cohen, 1960; McHugh, 2012) is planned before journal submission but is not reported in the present paper; and external peer debriefing with a researcher outside the author's institutional context was not feasible within the conference timeline. These omissions limit the credibility claims that can be made for the qualitative analysis and should be considered when weighing the qualitative findings against the more procedurally robust quantitative results.

Mixed-Methods Integration

Following Fetters et al. (2013), integration was performed through a joint-display table that paired each survey factor (Part A) and concern (Part C) with its corresponding FGD theme and a single convergence verdict. Three patterns were distinguished: convergent (both methods point the same way), divergent (the methods point different ways, treated as a finding rather than an error), and emergent (the qualitative method captures

something the survey did not measure). For concern items where the survey indicated overestimated concern relative to cadet self-reported experience, an additional interpretive move — the argument from absence — was used. This move holds that when participants are given open conversational space and readily articulate criticisms of some features of a program, their non-articulation of other potential criticisms is meaningful rather than merely deferential. The move is identified here as an interpretive frame rather than as direct empirical evidence, so that the relative weight a reader assigns to it remains a judgment call rather than a hidden assumption.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted under written permission from the Office of the SKSU President. Informed consent was obtained from all survey and FGD participants. All data are stored in access-controlled files in compliance with Republic Act No. 10173, the Data Privacy Act of 2012, and no personally identifiable information appears in any output of the study. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time without penalty.

RESULTS

Sample Profile

The realized sample consisted of 515 first-year students. Table 1 summarizes the distribution by NSTP component and by college group. Allied Health programs (chiefly Nursing and Midwifery) and Criminal Justice/Security programs together accounted for 53.8% of respondents, reflecting the soft institutional pairing between Nursing and CWTS and between Criminology and ROTC reported in the focus group sessions. As described in the Methods, the proportion of ROTC respondents (33.8%) exceeds the SKSU first-year ROTC enrolment estimate of approximately 16%; these and other whole-sample percentages should be read as sample descriptors only, and the analyses that follow are reported as conditional group comparisons rather than as inferences about the population proportion holding any given concern.

Table 1. Sample Profile by NSTP Component and College Group

Variable	Category	n	%
NSTP Component	ROTC	174	33.8
	CWTS	305	59.2
	LTS	36	7.0
College Group	Allied Health	196	38.1
	Criminal Justice / Security	81	15.7
	Education	80	15.5
	Engineering / Technology	75	14.6
	Agriculture	34	6.6
	Business	19	3.7
	Social Sciences	16	3.1
	Natural Sciences	8	1.6
	Other / Unspecified	6	1.2

Note. N = 515. ROTC respondents are overrepresented relative to the SKSU first-year population estimate of approximately 16%.

Determinants of NSTP Component Selection

Figure 1 presents item-level descriptives for the nine Part A influence factors, ranked by mean rating. Personal Development (M = 3.49, SD = 0.72), Peer Influence (M = 3.48, SD = 0.82), and Schedule Convenience (M = 3.47, SD = 0.72) emerged as the three highest-rated influences on respondents' chosen component. The lowest-rated factors were Course Alignment (M = 3.26) and Family Recommendation (M = 3.18). All means clustered

between 3.18 and 3.49, indicating uniformly high reported influence; this distributional compression motivated the convergent validation through the forced-rank measure (Part B).

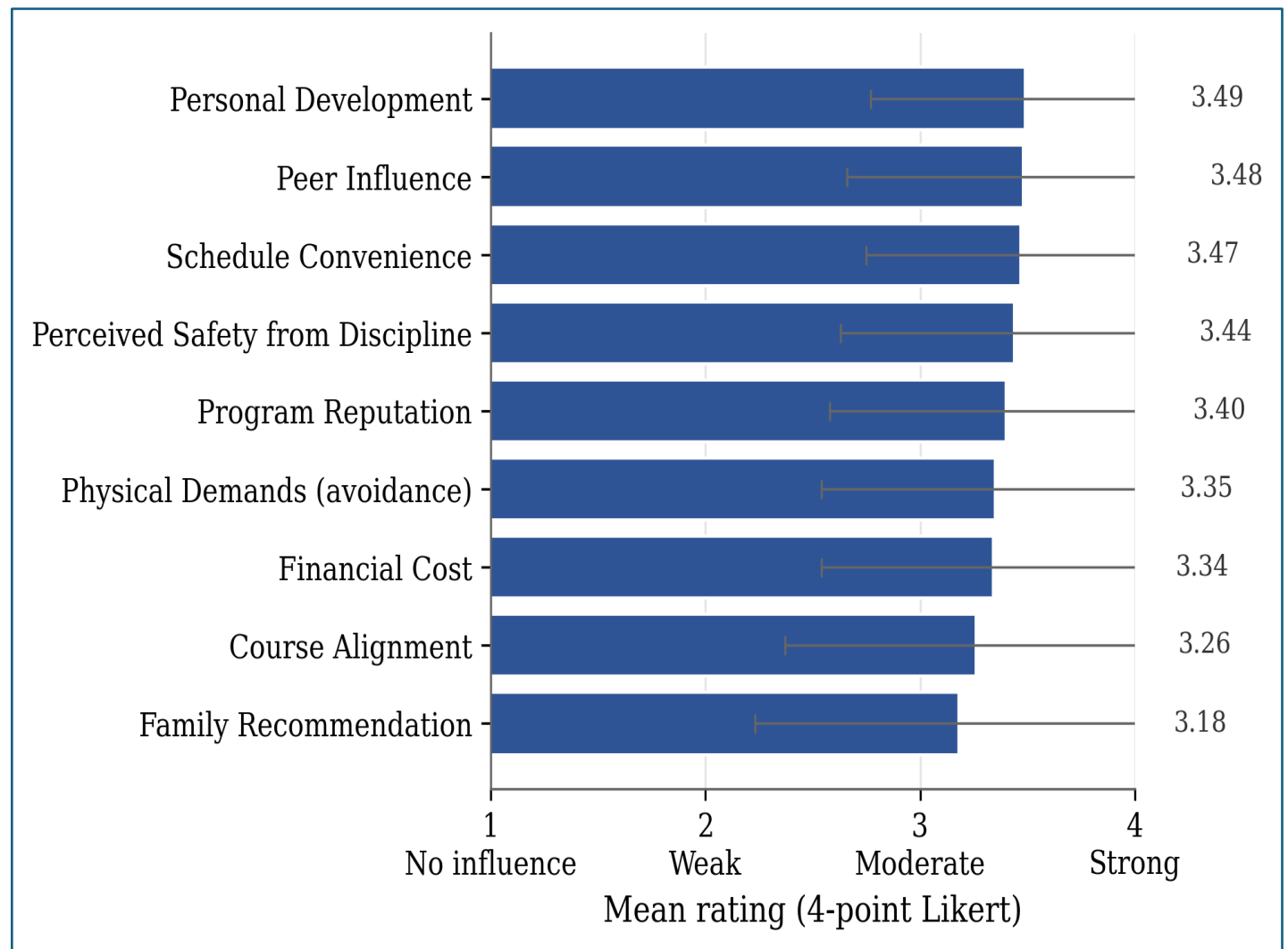


Figure 1. Mean influence ratings for nine Part A factors (4-point Likert scale; error bars = SD; N = 515). Factors ranked by descending mean.

Part B's forced-rank measure produced a different ordering. Schedule Convenience accumulated the highest weighted score (625, where Rank 1 = 3, Rank 2 = 2, Rank 3 = 1 point), followed by Peer Influence (595), Personal Development (543), and Financial Cost (524). Notably, Financial Cost exhibited the highest Top-3 frequency at 63.3% — that is, while it rarely appeared as the single most important factor (Rank 1 selected by only 12.6%), it was almost always present somewhere in respondents' top three. Spearman's rank correlation between the Part A mean ranking and the Part B weighted-score ranking was $\rho = .733$ ($p = .025$), indicating strong agreement between the two measurement approaches and supporting the convergent validity of the influence-factor instrument.

Figure 2 presents the Part A factor means disaggregated by NSTP component. Kruskal-Wallis tests indicated that seven of the nine factors showed statistically significant group differences, although all effect sizes fell within the small range ($\varepsilon^2 = .01$ to $.06$). The largest group differences occurred for Personal Development ($H = 31.41$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon^2 = .057$), Program Reputation ($H = 26.62$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon^2 = .048$), and Family Recommendation ($H = 24.14$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon^2 = .043$). Dunn-Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons indicated that ROTC cadets weighted Personal Development, Program Reputation, and Family Recommendation significantly more than CWTS and LTS students did (all pairwise $p < .01$). The two factors that did not differ across groups were Peer Influence ($H = 3.18$, $p = .204$) and Financial Cost ($H = 3.56$, $p = .168$), suggesting that these two influences operate roughly equally across all NSTP populations.

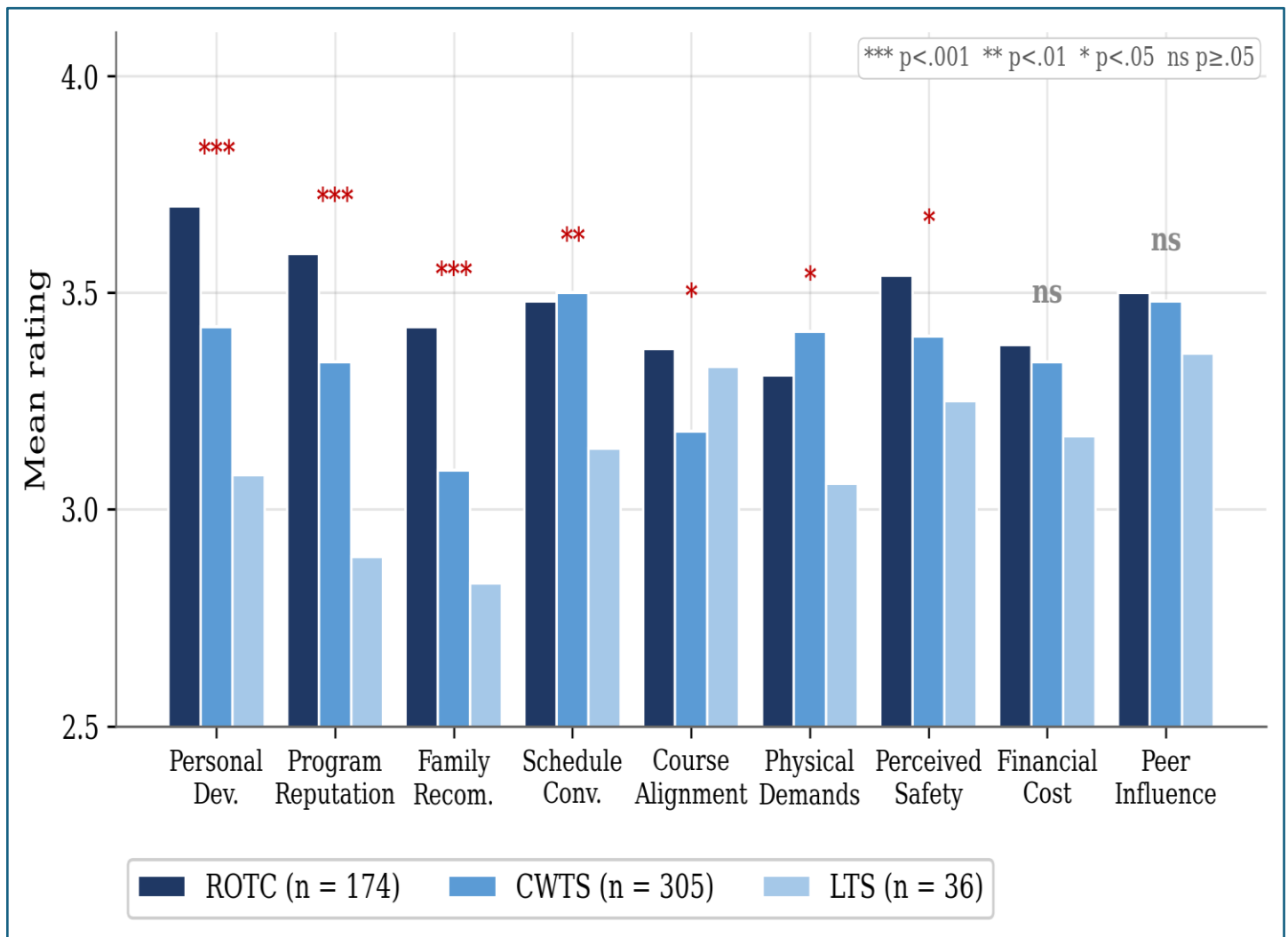


Figure 2. Part A factor means by NSTP component. Significance markers above each cluster: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, ns $p \geq .05$ (Kruskal-Wallis). Factors ordered left to right by descending H statistic. ROTC $n = 174$; CWTS $n = 305$; LTS $n = 36$.

Perceptions of ROTC: Concerns Overestimated Relative to Cadet Experience

Cronbach's alpha indicated acceptable internal consistency for both Part C sub-scales: the Benefits Index (C1–C4) yielded $\alpha = .79$, and the Concerns Index (C5–C9) yielded $\alpha = .84$. ROTC cadets scored higher on the Benefits Index than CWTS-and-LTS outsiders ($M = 3.80$ vs. 3.57 , $U = 41,336$, $p < .001$) and lower on the Concerns Index ($M = 2.81$ vs. 3.31 , $U = 41,631$, $p < .001$), consistent with the theoretical expectation that lived experience reduces concern intensity even as it increases endorsement of the program's stated benefits.

Each of the five concern items in Part C was tested with a one-tailed Mann-Whitney U comparing the outsider population (CWTS and LTS respondents, $n = 341$) against ROTC cadets ($n = 174$), under the pre-specified directional hypothesis that non-cadet ratings would exceed cadet ratings on the same item. Items returning a significant gap in this direction are described as displaying overestimated concern relative to cadet self-reported experience — or, where readability requires a shorter term, as “misconceptions” in scare quotes, with the operational meaning preserved. Figure 3 presents the per-item results. Three of five concerns met the criterion at $p < .001$: Hazing Risk ($U = 42,898$, $z = 8.28$, $p < .001$, $r = .365$; mean gap = $+0.87$), Financial Requirements ($U = 43,448$, $z = 8.63$, $p < .001$, $r = .380$; mean gap = $+0.83$), and Time Burden ($U = 39,673$, $z = 6.26$, $p < .001$, $r = .276$; mean gap = $+0.63$). For these items, the rating distribution among outsiders was systematically shifted higher than among cadets reporting on their own experience. The remaining two concerns — Physical Exhaustion / Heat ($U = 29,512$, $z = -0.10$, $p = .54$, $r = -.004$; mean gap = $+0.04$) and Disciplinary Strictness ($U = 31,635$, $z = 1.23$, $p = .09$, $r = .054$; mean gap = $+0.12$) — did not return significant gaps; both populations rated these concerns at substantively equivalent levels. All three significant gaps remain

significant under a Bonferroni-corrected family-wise threshold of $\alpha/5 = .01$, supporting the interpretive emphasis placed on them.

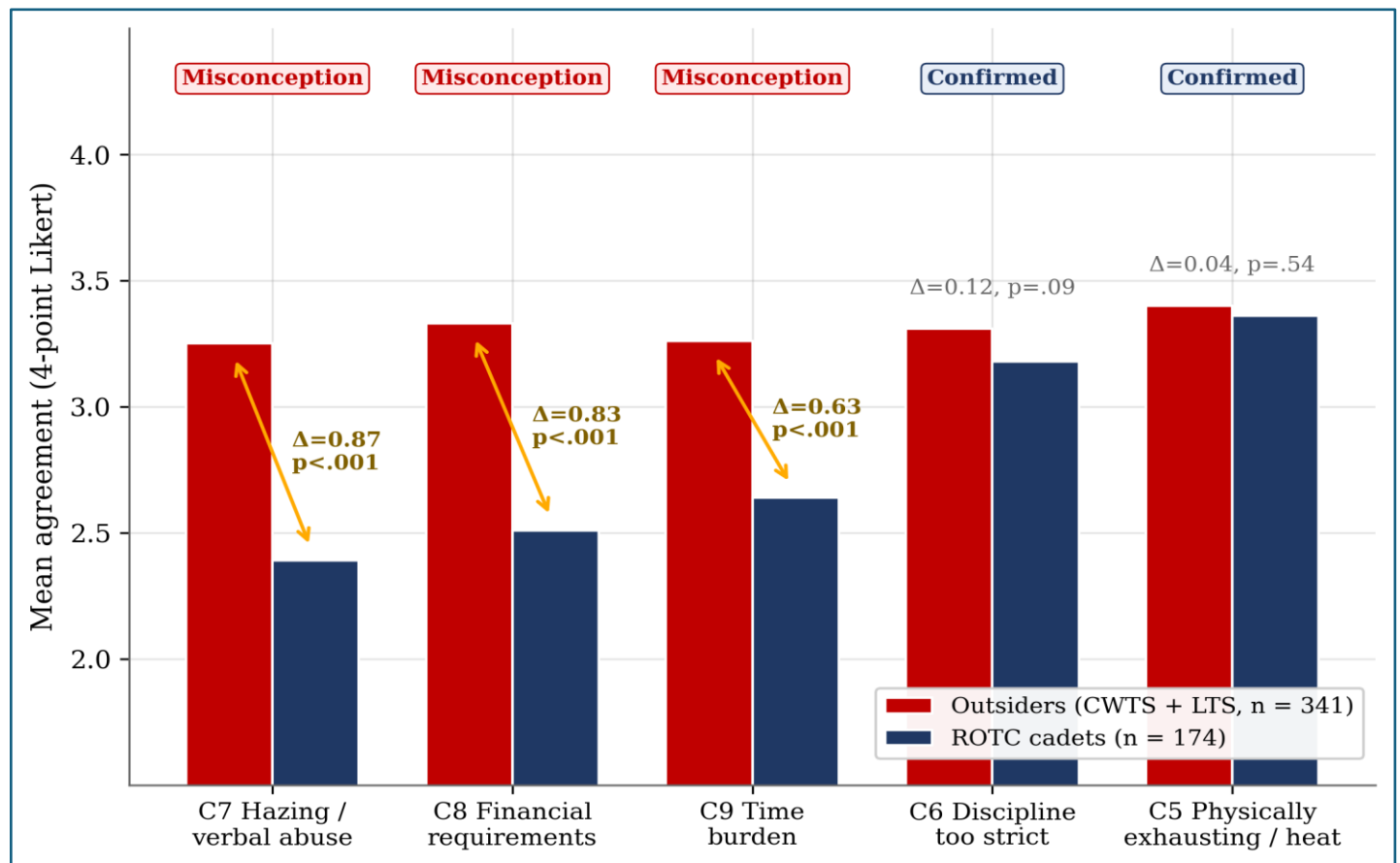


Figure 3. Concern-gap analysis: non-cadet versus cadet ratings on five Part C concern items. Outsiders (CWTS + LTS, n = 341) versus ROTC cadets (n = 174). Items grouped by analytic verdict: overestimated concerns relative to cadet experience (gap > 0, p < .001) on the left; confirmed concerns (no significant gap) on the right. One-tailed Mann-Whitney U test; Δ denotes the mean difference (outsiders minus cadets).

Qualitative Findings From the Focus Group Discussions

Four major themes emerged from the FGD material. The first was the dominance of distance to the Access main campus as a structural barrier. Across both off-Access campus FGDs, students returned repeatedly to the inconvenience and fare cost of travelling to ROTC training, framing the issue not as program rejection but as logistical impossibility:

Kay first that time, first year kami... Kay ang amon boarding house is diri sa Isulan tapos ang ROTC sa Access. So, magasto, sir, ba. Tapos wala kami pamasaha gihapon kis-a. Ang amon kwarta is eksakto para lang sa one (1) week gud.

[We were first-year, our boarding house is in Isulan but ROTC is at Access. So it costs money, sir. Sometimes we don't even have fare — our weekly allowance is just enough for one week.]

— Computer Engineering student, Isulan campus

A Tacurong campus participant articulated the same theme more directly: the constraint was not preference but practicality, and several students explicitly indicated they would have chosen ROTC if it had been offered locally. This theme was not prefigured in the survey instrument; it emerged inductively and was supported by the proximity-to-Access pattern in the survey's college distribution data.

The second theme was a perceived implementation gap in CWTS. Students across all four CWTS-side FGDs described the program as cleaning- and attendance-based, with weak performance assessment. The 4th-class

ROTC cadets, before the NSTP Director joined their session, independently raised the same concern from an administrative observer's perspective:

Mahirap kasi, sir. Yong iba hindi nila ma verify yong fairness ng mga evaluation. How are they going to evaluate the students, especially sa mga implementer based sa attendance lang man sila, sir. Hindi nila ini-evaluate kung naga perform.

[It's difficult, sir. Some can't verify the fairness of evaluations. How will the implementers evaluate students when they're going only by attendance? They don't actually evaluate whether the student is performing.]

— 4th-class ROTC cadet, S5

When the moderator subsequently observed that attendance gaming was structurally harder in ROTC, cadets confirmed: "Medyo mahirap" (Yes, somewhat difficult). This cadet voice independently established the implementation contrast that was later confirmed by the SKSU NSTP Director in his portion of the same session.

The third theme was a positive comparative judgment of ROTC's learning value, voiced by non-ROTC students themselves. The most direct expression came from a Computer Engineering student in the Isulan FGD, who, despite being enrolled in CWTS, characterized the comparison as one in which ROTC trainees "are really being trained" while CWTS students were "daw mga ginapabay-an" — left to their own devices. The same comparative judgment recurred in the Nursing and Tacurong sessions and aligned with the survey's finding that Personal Development was the highest-mean influence factor and that ROTC cadets weighted it most heavily.

The fourth and most analytically critical theme concerned the misconceptions identified in the survey. Outsiders attributed their concerns about hazing, time burden, and equipment cost explicitly to hearsay rather than to direct experience. An LTS Education student summarized the channel directly: "The reason why we refuse ROTC because of yong mga hearsay gud na kapoy magpinit ka sa araw" (The reason we refuse ROTC is the hearsay that it's tiring and you have to be in the sun). On the cadet side, the 4th-class ROTC cadets — given approximately 17 unprompted turns to discuss their program — readily criticized program administration, the absence of an SKSU Board Resolution affirming course-component pairing, and CWTS implementation, but did not raise hazing, equipment cost, or time burden as concerns. This pattern is interpreted, following the argument-from-absence move, as qualitative corroboration of the survey misconception findings: cadets' silence on these items is meaningful precisely because they spoke openly about other criticisms.

Beyond these four themes, three additional access-related findings surfaced across multiple sessions and warrant separate attention. Health-based self-exclusion was raised by students in three of the four CWTS-side FGDs. Specific conditions cited included asthma ("may asthma po ako, kaya parang hindi pwede sa ROTC"), recent abdominal surgery ("bago lang ako to opera sa appendix"), anemia, and a cardiac concern ("physically hindi man kaya sang heart ko ang intensive training kay may problema gud"). In each instance, the student framed exclusion as self-evident rather than as the outcome of a formal medical-clearance process, suggesting the absence of a documented exemption pathway through which students with genuine contraindications could be assessed individually rather than excluded by default. Gender-related concerns appeared more sparsely but were consistent. Female participants in the Computer Engineering FGD voiced uncertainty about ROTC's height requirement, with one student reporting that her belief in a 5'-and-above minimum was contradicted only after she met a shorter classmate already enrolled. The Nursing FGD surfaced a parallel cosmetic concern, framed informally by the moderator as the perception that ROTC "darkens" complexion in ways students conscious of professional appearance might wish to avoid. Course-program signaling was the third access-related theme. Multiple sessions reflected the implicit institutional pairing of Criminology with ROTC; a Computer Engineering student observed that ROTC was perceived as "course gid na" (already course-specific) for Criminology students, while the 4th-class cadets and the NSTP Director independently confirmed that no formal SKSU Board Resolution mandates this pairing — meaning the perception of course-programmatic exclusivity is itself a self-reinforcing barrier that the institution can address.

Mixed-Methods Integration

Table 2 presents the joint display integrating the Part A factor findings with the FGD evidence. Convergent verdicts predominated for the high-influence factors (Schedule Convenience, Personal Development), with FGD material providing concrete mechanism for survey patterns. Two divergences are analytically informative: Peer Influence was prominent in Part B (#2 by weighted score) but rarely articulated in the FGDs — suggesting that what the survey detects as peer effects is largely program-major bundling (whole cohorts of Nursing in CWTS, whole cohorts of Criminology in ROTC) rather than active social pressure. Perceived Safety from Discipline appeared moderate in the survey but did not surface unprompted in the FGDs, consistent with its character as a residual rumour-driven concern rather than a lived deterrent. The most important emergent finding — distance to Access campus — sits outside the joint-display rows entirely, since it was not measured in the survey instrument; it was, however, the most-coded theme in the FGD corpus.

Table 2. Joint Display: Part A Survey Factors and Corresponding FGD Themes

Factor	Survey Position	FGD Theme	Verdict
Schedule Convenience	#1 weighted	3 AM wake-up, Saturday-only sessions	Convergent
Peer Influence	#2 weighted	Implicit; program-major bundling	Divergent
Personal Development	#1 mean; #3 weighted	“ROTC = real learning” (cross-FGD)	Convergent
Financial Cost	#1 in Top-3 (63.3%)	Travel fare > equipment cost	Convergent (Reframed)
Perceived Safety	Moderate	Not raised unprompted	Divergent
Course Alignment	ROTC > CWTS	Director: institutional encouragement only	Convergent
Physical Demands	Modest	Heat and health limitations	Convergent
Family Recommendation	Last in Part B	Implicit only	Divergent
Program Reputation	Mid-rank	Hearsay and rumors from seniors	Convergent
Distance to Access	Not measured	Dominant FGD theme	Emergent

Note. Verdict definitions: Convergent = both methods point the same way; Divergent = methods point different ways; Emergent = qualitative method captures something the survey did not measure.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the determinants of NSTP component selection and the perceptions of the ROTC program among 515 first-year students at Sultan Kudarat State University, integrating quantitative survey evidence with qualitative material from five focus group sessions. Three principal findings warrant discussion: the differentiated structure of student concerns (the distinction between overestimated and confirmed concerns), the emergent dominance of distance as a structural barrier, and the institutional implementation gap in CWTS.

Overestimated and Confirmed Concerns

The pattern of overestimated concern has direct programmatic implications at SKSU. Three of the five concerns about ROTC — hazing risk, equipment cost, and time burden — were rated substantially higher by non-cadets than by cadets reporting on their own experience, while two — physical exhaustion and disciplinary strictness — were rated at comparable levels by both populations. The distinction matters because the corresponding interventions are categorically different. Overestimated concerns are addressable through information: a transparent anti-hazing protocol with cadet testimonials, accurate publication of equipment requirements alongside any subsidy or lending arrangement, and realistic schedule disclosure can each reduce inflated outsider perceptions without requiring any change to the program itself. Confirmed concerns, by contrast, are not amenable to communications alone. Heat exposure and the strict discipline regime are real features of the program and require operational responses — indoor training days during peak temperature months, hydration and heat-safety protocols, and transparent disciplinary procedures that distinguish legitimate cadet-development discipline from anything that could be construed as hazing. The interpretive caveat

warrants emphasis: the present design establishes only that non-cadet ratings exceeded cadet self-reports on three items. It does not establish whether the absolute level of hazing, cost, or time burden at SKSU is in fact low; that would require independent audit data the present study does not collect.

This differentiation is consistent with recent Philippine empirical work. Bagundol et al. (2023) reported that senior high school students rated ROTC favorably on physical and psychological capability development but less favorably on knowledge dimensions; the present study's finding that outsiders' concerns about ROTC's intensity and rigor are partly accurate (heat, discipline) and partly inflated (hazing, time, cost) refines this picture by separating which concerns warrant operational reform from which warrant only better information. Pasion et al. (2024), in their Metro Manila multi-dimensional analysis, similarly identified communication gaps between ROTC programs and the broader student population as a recurrent implementation problem; the present study contributes the empirical specification of exactly which content the communications should address.

Distance as Structural Barrier

The emergent finding that distance to the Access main campus operates as the dominant practical barrier for off-campus students reframes the policy question. ROTC enrolment at SKSU is not 16% because students reject the program. It is 16% in significant part because students at Tacurong, Isulan, Bagumbayan, and other affiliate campuses cannot feasibly travel to Access for weekly training. The FGD evidence indicates that several students who described themselves as wanting to enrol could not justify the fare and time cost. This is a structural barrier requiring a structural fix: decentralized ROTC delivery at affiliate campuses, or alternatively a transport stipend that closes the cost gap. Neither response was indicated by the survey instrument alone; the finding emerged because the qualitative method permitted students to raise issues the instrument designer had not anticipated, illustrating exactly the complementarity that motivates mixed-methods research (O'Cathain et al., 2010; Fetters et al., 2013).

CWTS Implementation Gap

A finding cutting across NSTP components, and therefore relevant to Objective 4, was the perceived implementation gap in CWTS. Students across all four CWTS-side FGDs described the program as predominantly cleaning activity with attendance-based grading. The 4th-class ROTC cadets, speaking before the NSTP Director joined their session, independently raised the same concern from an administrative observation perspective. The Director's subsequent confirmation completes a triangulation across three independent vantage points: enrolled CWTS students who experience the program, cadets who observe it, and the institutional officer who oversees it. This cross-position convergence is consistent with broader Philippine NSTP literature (Saban & Saban, 2020; Crisostomo et al., 2018) reporting variable implementation quality. The corrective action lies primarily with the SKSU NSTP Office rather than with the Reserve Command and includes standardized rubrics, formal lecture content, and performance-based assessment to complement attendance recording.

Inclusivity and Maximum Voluntary Participation

A finding that cuts across several of the preceding themes concerns the question of who, in practice, has access to ROTC at SKSU under the current configuration. Four distinct exclusion mechanisms emerged from the qualitative material, and although the survey instrument did not measure them directly, each is supported by multi-session FGD evidence and by the survey's college-level distribution data. Geographic exclusion is the largest in magnitude: students at off-Access campuses face fare costs and travel time that, by their own report, exceed their weekly subsistence budget. Health-based exclusion operates more quietly but recurred in three of the four CWTS-side FGDs, with students citing specific medical conditions as making ROTC "not possible" without indication that any individualized clearance process had been attempted. Gender-related exclusion appeared chiefly through misconceptions about height requirements and through informal cosmetic-cost perceptions; one female participant's report that her belief in a 5'-minimum height requirement was corrected only by direct observation of a shorter classmate already enrolled illustrates how rumour can produce de facto exclusion in the absence of official communication. Course-program exclusion arises from the soft institutional

pairing of Criminology with ROTC, which both the Computer Engineering students and the cadets in S5 observed: students in non-Criminology programs perceive ROTC as not for them, even though the Director confirmed that no formal SKSU Board Resolution restricts ROTC to Criminology majors.

These four exclusion mechanisms are conceptually distinct from the misconceptions discussed above and from the operational concerns about heat and discipline. They are also distinct from active rejection of the program: in each case, students articulated a desire or willingness to participate that was overridden by a perceived structural impossibility. The implication is that voluntary enrolment under the current SKSU configuration is constrained from both sides — by reasons students give to refuse ROTC and by reasons that prevent students from accessing it in the first place. A coherent program-improvement strategy must address both. Maximum voluntary participation, in this framing, is achieved not only by making the program more attractive to those who can participate but also by removing the structural barriers that prevent participation by students who already want to. This dual framing is consistent with the inclusion-conscious public-administration approach increasingly applied to civic and educational programs in the Philippine state university context, and it directly responds to RA 9163's underlying intent that NSTP component selection be a genuine student choice rather than a constrained one.

Implications for the Mandatory ROTC Question

The present findings speak indirectly to the broader Philippine policy debate over the proposed reinstatement of mandatory ROTC under House Bill No. 6687 and Senate Bill No. 2034, although the connection requires caution given the single-institution scope of this study. The case for mandatory imposition typically rests on the assumption that voluntary enrolment is depressed because of unfounded fears about the program. At SKSU specifically, the present results suggest that the assumption is partly supported and partly not. Voluntary enrolment at this institution appears to be shaped by a combination of overestimated concerns (hazing, cost, time) that legislative compulsion would not correct, of program features (heat, discipline) that are real and would be encountered by any student compelled to enrol, of structural barriers (distance to the Access campus) that compulsion would not remove, and of access-related self-exclusion (health, gender, course-program) that compulsion would override rather than dissolve. For SKSU, this pattern suggests that communications, operational, decentralization, and inclusivity interventions are likely to be more proximate to the mechanisms shaping enrolment than legislative compulsion. Whether the same pattern obtains at other state universities, in private higher education institutions, or in the urbanized National Capital Region remains an empirical question that the present data cannot answer. The findings should therefore be read as raising a hypothesis worth testing in additional Philippine contexts, rather than as a generalizable argument against the mandatory ROTC bills themselves.

Strengths and Limitations

The study has several strengths: a substantial survey sample for a single state university ($n = 515$), parallel measurement of influence factors through both rating and forced-rank approaches with strong cross-method agreement (Spearman $\rho = .73$, $p = .025$), and qualitative grounding across multiple campuses including one session with current 4th-class ROTC cadets. Each analytical claim about overestimated concern is paired with quantitative test statistics and effect sizes alongside its qualitative analogue through the joint display, allowing readers to weigh the two streams of evidence separately rather than as a combined assertion.

Several limitations qualify the conclusions and warrant explicit acknowledgement. First, the study is conducted at a single state university, which constrains generalization. Findings should be read as hypothesis-generating for the broader Philippine higher education sector rather than as established empirical claims about it. Second, the sample is a convenience sample with no measurable response rate, and ROTC respondents are substantially overrepresented (33.8% of the sample against an estimated 16% of the SKSU first-year population). Group comparisons that condition on NSTP component remain valid under this design, but whole-sample descriptive statistics are not population estimates without post-stratification weighting, which the present analysis does not apply. Third, the “misconception” framing has been used in the paper as a shorthand for the descriptive statistical pattern of higher non-cadet ratings against lower cadet ratings; readers should not infer that the absolute level of hazing, equipment cost, or time burden at SKSU is necessarily low. The present design

establishes only that non-cadet concern exceeds cadet self-report. An independent audit of program conditions would be required to substantiate the stronger claim. Fourth, the 4th-class ROTC cadet focus group displayed unusual administrative knowledge of NSTP policy and enrolment figures, suggesting that cadets in cadre or leadership positions may have been differentially recruited; a follow-up focus group with non-cadre cadets would test whether the argument-from-absence reading holds for the broader cadet population. Fifth, the present analysis reports first-coder thematic analysis only; second-coder review with Cohen's kappa is planned before journal submission. Sixth, member checking with participants was not conducted because contact information was not collected, and external peer debriefing was not feasible within the conference timeline; the qualitative findings should therefore be weighed against the more procedurally robust quantitative results when readers form their overall assessment of the study's conclusions.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to determine why first-year students at Sultan Kudarat State University choose among ROTC, CWTS, and LTS, and to assess whether the perceptions held by non-cadets accurately reflect the lived experience of cadets. By combining survey evidence from 515 first-year students with focus group material from five sessions across three campuses, including one with current 4th-class ROTC cadets, the study produced a differentiated picture of the enrolment problem that no single method could have generated alone.

Three substantive conclusions follow, framed as patterns observed in this single-institution sample. First, the determinants of NSTP component selection are not uniform across the student population at SKSU: ROTC cadets are drawn disproportionately by personal development, program reputation, and family recommendation, while peer influence and financial cost operate at comparable levels across all three components. Second, the perceived deterrents against ROTC are not all of one kind — three of the five concerns measured (hazing risk, equipment cost, time burden) showed overestimated concern among non-cadets relative to cadet self-reported experience, while two (heat exposure, strict discipline) were endorsed at comparable levels by both populations. The qualitative material was consistent with this pattern, although the argument from absence on which the qualitative corroboration depends is explicitly framed as an interpretive move rather than as direct evidence. Third, the dominant practical barriers to ROTC reported in the qualitative material are access-related rather than program-related, operating along four dimensions — geographic (the centralization of training at the Access main campus), health-related (informal self-exclusion by students with medical conditions), gender-related (height and physical-appearance beliefs), and course-programmatic (the soft pairing of ROTC with Criminology majors). These emerged from the qualitative method and are not visible in the quantitative survey alone.

These conclusions carry direct policy implications. The communications problem (misconceptions) and the operational problem (heat, discipline) require categorically different interventions; the structural problem (distance) requires neither communications nor operational reform but decentralized program delivery. The CWTS implementation concern that surfaced from cadets, outsiders, and the NSTP Director alike argues for parallel reform of NSTP-wide assessment standards, a finding relevant to the SKSU NSTP Office independent of the Reserve Command's interest in ROTC enrolment. Cutting across all of these is a fourth thread, the question of inclusion: the present configuration of ROTC at SKSU produces de facto exclusion along geographic, health, gender, and course-program lines, in each case operating through structural barriers that prevent participation by students who would otherwise enrol. Maximum voluntary participation is therefore achievable only through a coordinated inclusivity framework in which decentralized delivery, individualized health-clearance pathways, gender-inclusive recruitment, and explicit course-program openness are pursued together rather than as isolated reforms.

More broadly, the study contributes a Philippine empirical baseline from a single state university to a policy debate that is currently being conducted with limited recourse to first-year-student data. As Senate Bill No. 2034 and the National Citizens Service Training Program proposals proceed through the legislative process, the question of whether voluntary enrolment is depressed by genuine program features, by overestimated concerns, by structural barriers, or by access-related self-exclusion has direct bearing on the design of any corrective intervention. The SKSU findings suggest, for this institution, that compulsory imposition would not directly address the four mechanisms identified here; whether the same pattern holds at other institutions is an

open empirical question. A communications, operational, structural, and inclusivity response — implemented at SKSU and evaluated for effects on voluntary enrolment — would test the present hypotheses in a manner that legislative action alone cannot. Future work should extend the present study to additional state university systems and to private higher education institutions, conduct dedicated focus groups with cadets recruited outside cadre populations to test the qualitative findings, examine whether the pattern of overestimated concern documented here generalizes across the Philippine higher education sector, and evaluate the inclusivity framework empirically by comparing pre- and post-implementation enrolment across the four exclusion dimensions identified.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Four recommendations follow from the findings, framed as actions appropriate to the SKSU institutional context. First, the Reserve Command should develop a structured pre-enrolment communications package addressing the three concerns identified as overestimated relative to cadet self-reported experience — hazing, equipment cost, and time burden — using cadet testimonials, transparent protocols, and realistic schedule disclosure rather than promotional rhetoric. Second, the SKSU administration, in coordination with the Reserve Command, should pilot decentralized ROTC delivery at the Tacurong and Isulan campuses to test whether the structural distance barrier, removed, increases voluntary enrolment among students who already report wanting to participate. Third, the SKSU NSTP Office should standardize CWTS assessment through formal lectures, written examinations, and performance-based rubrics that complement attendance, addressing the cross-component implementation concern that surfaced from students, cadets, and the NSTP Director alike.

Fourth, and as a unifying principle for the preceding three actions, the SKSU NSTP Office and Reserve Command should jointly develop an inclusivity framework designed to maximize voluntary participation across geographic, health, gender, and course-program lines. Concretely, this framework would consist of four components. Geographic inclusivity is operationalized through the campus-decentralization pilot already proposed, complemented by a transport stipend for any residual cross-campus travel during the transition period. Health-related inclusivity requires a documented medical-clearance pathway: rather than allowing students with asthma, post-operative status, anemia, or cardiac concerns to self-exclude, the program should offer individualized assessment by a qualified medical officer, with modified physical-training options for those who can safely participate at reduced intensity and a transparent referral to CWTS for those who cannot. Gender-inclusive recruitment requires explicit correction of the height-requirement and physical-appearance misconceptions identified in the FGDs, ideally through visible female-cadet representation in pre-enrolment orientations and through a published statement of the actual physical standards. Course-program inclusivity requires reaffirming, in writing and at every freshman orientation, that ROTC is open to students of all majors under RA 9163 and that the absence of an SKSU Board Resolution restricting ROTC to Criminology students should be communicated as an opening rather than left as ambient ambiguity. Together with the first three recommendations, these inclusivity components address the demand side and the supply side of voluntary enrolment in parallel: a more attractive program for students who can already participate and a removal of structural barriers for students who currently cannot. The four actions distinguish between the categorically different interventions appropriate to misconceptions, structural barriers, implementation gaps, and access constraints, and together they offer a coherent response to the multi-source evidence assembled in this study.

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