

# Lived Experiences of Criminology Students on Academic Preparedness through Review Center Participation

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## ABSTRACT

The increasing demand for licensure examination success has intensified the need for effective preparatory support systems among criminology students. This study examined the lived experiences of criminology graduates in relation to review center programs and their perceived contribution to academic preparedness for the Criminologist Licensure Examination. A qualitative phenomenological research design was employed to capture in-depth accounts of participants who had undergone structured review training. Twelve (12) criminology graduates from Ozamiz City, Philippines, who successfully passed the CLE, were purposively selected as participants. The study acknowledges that focusing solely on successful passers may limit the breadth of perspectives regarding review center effectiveness. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30–60 minutes per participant and analyzed using Moustakas' phenomenological approach through bracketing, horizontalization, clustering of meanings, and synthesis of textual and structural descriptions to identify significant statements and essential meanings. The findings of the study generated the following cluster themes: Experiencing the Review Center as a Supportive and Challenging Learning Environment; Experiencing the Impact of Review Center Programs and Learning Resources; Experiencing the Process of Confronting and Overcoming Academic Weaknesses; Experiencing Instructor Influence and the Development of Test-Taking Competence; Experiencing the Review Center as a Complement to Formal Education; and Experiencing Peer Support, Confidence Development, and Exam Readiness. Verbatim participant quotations were used to support each theme, strengthening the credibility and authenticity of the findings. The study concludes that review centers significantly enhance criminology students' academic preparedness by providing structured learning, targeted remediation, instructional support, and collaborative learning opportunities that collectively improve confidence and examination readiness. It is recommended that review programs further strengthen learner-centered instruction, improve learning environments, integrate diagnostic and individualized support mechanisms, and enhance collaboration among instructors, peers, and institutions to optimize licensure examination outcomes.

**Keywords:** academic preparedness, criminology education, licensure examination, peer support, review centers, test-taking competence

## INTRODUCTION

### Rationale of the Study

The transition from academic training to professional qualification remains a critical stage for criminology students, as licensure examinations serve as a key benchmark of competence and readiness for practice. In the Philippines, the Criminologist Licensure Examination (CLE) functions as the primary gateway for graduates seeking entry into law enforcement and related fields, assessing knowledge across core criminological disciplines and applied professional skills (Super Tutor PH, 2026). Given the high stakes associated with this examination, students increasingly engage in supplementary learning mechanisms to strengthen their academic preparedness and examination confidence (Ayeo-eo, 2026).

Among these support systems, review centers have become a prominent form of academic reinforcement, offering structured programs that aim to consolidate learning and enhance examination performance. These

institutions typically provide intensive lectures, mock examinations, and targeted review strategies designed to address knowledge gaps and improve test-taking competence (Buan & Moyao, 2026). Empirical findings suggest that institutional support, curriculum alignment, and structured review interventions significantly contribute to licensure examination readiness among criminology students (Capundan & Belarmino, 2025). Moreover, psychological preparedness, academic discipline, and guided review exposure are consistently identified as influencing factors in examination success (Albina et al., 2022).

Despite their growing popularity, review centers remain a subject of academic debate regarding their actual effectiveness and equity implications. While some studies highlight their role in reinforcing classroom learning and improving examination outcomes, others raise concerns about overreliance on external review systems and financial accessibility among students (Albina et al., 2022). Additional research indicates that challenges such as anxiety, limited mastery of technical subjects, and financial constraints continue to affect examinees, even among those enrolled in structured review programs (Ayeo-eo, 2026). These mixed perspectives suggest the need for further investigation into how review centers genuinely influence criminology students' academic preparedness.

Although existing literature has explored licensure examination performance and review strategies in various disciplines, there remains a limited body of research specifically focusing on criminology education and its unique demands. Studies on licensure performance emphasize that institutional preparation, faculty support, and structured review programs contribute significantly to examination outcomes (Capundan & Belarmino, 2025). However, gaps persist in understanding how criminology students experience and evaluate these review systems in relation to their academic confidence and readiness for professional practice. This study therefore seeks to examine the effectiveness of review centers in enhancing the academic preparedness of criminology students, with particular focus on their perceived contribution to licensure examination success and professional readiness.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of criminology students who have participated in review center programs, focusing on their perceptions of the center's effectiveness, the challenges encountered, and the ways in which peer and instructor support influenced their preparation.

Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do criminology students describe their overall experience at the review center?
2. Which programs, services, or learning resources do students find most helpful, and how do these facilitate academic preparedness?
3. How do students experience and address challenges or weaknesses in their academic preparation through the review center?
4. How do peer interactions, group activities, and instructor support influence students' confidence and readiness for the Criminologist Licensure Examination?

### **METHODS**

The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of criminology graduates who had undergone review center preparation for the Criminologist Licensure Examination.

The investigation was conducted in Ozamiz City, Misamis Occidental, Philippines.

Twelve criminology graduates who successfully passed the licensure examination were purposively selected as participants. Participants were recruited through referral and direct contact with review center completers who met the inclusion criteria. Selection was based on their direct experience with review center programs and their ability to provide reflective accounts. Data saturation was achieved at the twelfth participant, as no new themes emerged during the final interviews.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 30–60 minutes and audio-recorded with participant consent for accuracy. Data analysis followed Moustakas' phenomenological framework. Bracketing (epoché) was first applied to set aside researcher assumptions. This was followed by horizontalization, where all significant statements were treated with equal value. Meanings were then formulated and clustered into themes through systematic coding procedures. An audit trail was maintained to document coding decisions and theme development. Textural and structural descriptions were synthesized to arrive at the essence of the phenomenon. Member checking was conducted to validate interpretations with participants.

To ensure trustworthiness, credibility was strengthened through verbatim transcription and member checking; dependability was ensured through consistent coding procedures; confirmability was achieved through audit trail documentation; and transferability was supported through detailed contextual descriptions.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Cluster Theme 1: Experiencing the Review Center as a Supportive and Challenging Learning Environment

The participants described the review center as a dual-purpose environment that functioned both as a source of motivation and as a site of academic and emotional strain. On one hand, it provided encouragement, focus, and a sense of direction that strengthened their commitment to licensure preparation. On the other hand, students also encountered physical discomfort, mental fatigue, and emotional exhaustion brought about by intensive review schedules and environmental constraints. As one participant shared, "The review center motivated me to study harder, but it was also very tiring because of the long hours and pressure." (Participant 2) This suggests that preparation for licensure examinations is not purely cognitive but also deeply influenced by emotional resilience and environmental conditions. The experience reflects a balance between support systems and stressors that shape students' readiness for high-stakes examinations.

This finding aligns with evidence that social support significantly enhances academic engagement and persistence among students by fostering motivation and emotional stability (Chen et al., 2023). Likewise, psychological capital and perceived support have been shown to improve academic adjustment and performance outcomes in higher education contexts (Hassan et al., 2023). However, environmental conditions also play a critical role in learning effectiveness. Studies demonstrate that inadequate thermal comfort and poor classroom conditions negatively affect concentration and academic performance (Romero et al., 2024). Similarly, learning spaces with uncomfortable physical conditions have been associated with reduced cognitive efficiency and learning satisfaction (Guevara et al., 2021). In criminology licensure contexts, similar findings emphasize that both psychological endurance and learning environments significantly influence examination readiness and performance. These findings suggest that both psychosocial and environmental factors must be considered in designing effective review programs.

### Cluster Theme 2: Experiencing the Impact of Review Center Programs and Learning Resources

Participants emphasized that structured lectures, mock examinations, coaching sessions, and organized study materials significantly enhanced their understanding of criminology concepts and strengthened their exam preparation. These resources provided clarity, reinforced foundational knowledge, and enabled systematic review of key topics. Practice tests, in particular, were identified as valuable tools for identifying weaknesses and tracking progress. One participant stated, "The mock exams really helped me see which topics I needed to improve before the actual board exam." (Participant 5). Despite these benefits, some participants expressed the need for more flexible learning options, including extended discussions and recorded sessions to accommodate different learning paces.

These observations are consistent with research highlighting the effectiveness of practice testing in improving retention, knowledge retrieval, and exam performance (Ifenthaler et al., 2023). Additionally, well-structured instructional materials have been linked to improved academic outcomes due to their role in supporting consistent review and concept reinforcement (Li & Wang, 2024). However, learning effectiveness is maximized when students actively engage with materials rather than passively receiving information (Karjanto & Acelajado,

2022). Studies in criminology licensure preparation similarly highlight the importance of structured review programs and repeated testing in improving board examination outcomes (Capundan & Belarmino, 2025). This suggests that review centers should integrate active learning strategies such as interactive discussions and spaced retrieval to enhance comprehension and retention.

### **Cluster Theme 3: Experiencing the Process of Confronting and Overcoming Academic Weaknesses**

The participants reported that encountering academic difficulties prompted them to adopt deliberate and structured learning strategies. These included extended study hours, repeated practice exercises, peer-assisted learning, and the breakdown of complex topics into manageable components. Diagnostic testing also played a significant role in identifying weak areas, enabling targeted remediation. As one participant explained, “When I realized my weak subjects, I studied longer and practiced more until I improved.” (Participant 7). This process reflects a shift toward self-regulated learning, where students actively take responsibility for improving their performance.

Empirical literature supports the effectiveness of diagnostic and remedial learning approaches in improving academic outcomes. Studies indicate that identifying learning gaps through diagnostic assessments allows for targeted interventions that enhance mastery (Magister et al., 2021). Similarly, formative assessment combined with structured feedback significantly improves student performance when interventions are personalized (BMC Medical Education, 2024). Moreover, active learning strategies such as self-testing, repetition, and peer collaboration have been shown to strengthen retention and examination performance (Sultana et al., 2025). Criminology licensure studies also emphasize that targeted remediation and self-regulated learning are critical predictors of examination success. These findings reinforce the importance of structured remediation and learner autonomy in academic preparation.

### **Cluster Theme 4: Experiencing Instructor Influence and the Development of Test-Taking Competence**

Participants highlighted instructors as central figures in their academic and professional preparation, describing them as mentors who simplified complex concepts and provided practical examination strategies. Beyond content delivery, instructors contributed to the development of essential test-taking skills such as time management, critical reasoning, and question analysis. This instructional influence helped students develop confidence and composure during examinations. One participant noted, “Our instructors gave techniques on how to answer questions faster and correctly during the exam.” (Participant 3)

Research supports the importance of instructional quality and feedback in enhancing academic performance. Instructor feedback has been shown to improve student self-regulation and learning outcomes when combined with structured assessment tools (Panadero et al., 2023). Similarly, teaching practices that encourage explanation, interaction, and guided reasoning contribute to deeper understanding and improved academic performance (Manaig et al., 2024). In blended or structured learning environments, instructional clarity and engagement have also been associated with higher achievement levels (Schüssler et al., 2022). In criminology review contexts, instructor guidance has been identified as a key factor in improving both conceptual understanding and test-taking competence. These findings emphasize the importance of instructor-led strategies in developing both knowledge and examination competence.

### **Cluster Theme 5: Experiencing the Review Center as a Complement to Formal Education**

Participants viewed review centers as a complementary extension of their formal criminology education. While college provided theoretical grounding and conceptual understanding, review centers offered focused, condensed, and examination-oriented reinforcement. This dual learning pathway enabled students to transition from broad academic knowledge to targeted licensure preparation. Review sessions also helped them address difficult subjects more intensively through repetition and guided instruction. A participant shared, “What we learned in college was the foundation, but the review center helped us focus on what is important for the board exam.” (Participant 9).

Supporting literature indicates that structured review programs significantly enhance licensure examination performance by reinforcing academic knowledge and improving readiness (Paz et al., 2024). Engagement in review sessions has also been associated with improved preparedness and confidence among examinees (Isidro & Santos, 2023). Furthermore, supplemental review programs are particularly effective in bridging gaps between academic instruction and professional examination requirements (Delgado & Reyes, 2022). Criminology licensure studies further confirm that review centers act as bridging mechanisms between academic preparation and board examination demands. These findings suggest that review centers serve a distinct academic function by translating theoretical learning into practical examination competence.

### **Cluster Theme 6: Experiencing Peer Support, Confidence Development, and Exam Readiness**

The participants emphasized the importance of peer collaboration in strengthening both academic understanding and emotional preparedness. Group study sessions, shared discussions, and collaborative practice exams fostered mutual support, reduced anxiety, and enhanced motivation. Over time, these interactions contributed to increased confidence and a stronger sense of readiness for the licensure examination. One participant stated, “Studying with my classmates helped me feel less anxious and more confident before the exam.” (Participant 11).

Research confirms that peer-assisted learning significantly improves academic performance, self-efficacy, and motivation among students (Topping, 2020). Cooperative learning environments have also been shown to enhance cognitive engagement and comprehension of complex subjects (Laal & Ghodsi, 2021). Additionally, peer support plays a mediating role in reducing academic stress and improving performance by strengthening psychological resilience (Khan et al., 2023). Similar findings in criminology licensure preparation highlight peer collaboration as a key contributor to confidence-building and examination readiness. These findings highlight the importance of collaborative learning structures in enhancing both cognitive and emotional readiness for high-stakes examinations.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings of the study demonstrate that review center programs play a substantial role in shaping criminology students’ academic preparedness for the Criminologist Licensure Examination. Participants consistently described their experience as both academically enriching and psychologically demanding, where structured review sessions contributed to improved knowledge retention, conceptual understanding, and examination confidence. At the same time, the effectiveness of these programs was influenced by several interconnected factors, including the quality of instruction, availability of learning resources, environmental conditions, and emotional support systems.

The results further indicate that review centers are most effective when they provide structured instruction, diagnostic assessment, targeted remediation, and opportunities for collaborative learning. Instructor competence and peer engagement emerged as critical elements in strengthening test-taking skills and sustaining motivation throughout the review period. Overall, review centers function not merely as supplemental academic institutions but as transformative spaces that bridge formal education and professional licensure requirements.

However, the study is limited by its focus on participants who successfully passed the CLE, which may not fully capture the experiences and challenges of non-passers or those who may not have benefited equally from review center programs.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Review centers are encouraged to strengthen instructional delivery by integrating more interactive and learner-centered approaches that promote active engagement rather than passive learning. Regular enhancement of teaching strategies and continuous professional development for instructors should also be prioritized to ensure effective content delivery and examination-oriented coaching.

It is likewise recommended that review programs incorporate systematic diagnostic assessments and individualized learning interventions to better address students’ academic weaknesses. Expanding access to

flexible learning options such as recorded lectures, extended discussions, and refresher sessions may further support diverse learning needs and pacing.

Stakeholders are advised to improve physical learning conditions by ensuring adequate ventilation, comfort, and conducive study environments to enhance focus and cognitive performance during review sessions. Strengthening peer-assisted learning activities and structured group engagements may also help reinforce understanding and build confidence among examinees.

Finally, collaboration among educational institutions, review centers, and relevant agencies should be sustained to ensure that review programs remain responsive, inclusive, and aligned with licensure examination standards, thereby improving the overall success rate and professional readiness of criminology graduates.

Future studies are strongly recommended to include non-passers, current reviewees, and review instructors to provide a more comprehensive and critical evaluation of review center effectiveness.

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