

Study on the Experiences of Students Enrolled in Programs Not of Their Own Choice: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

The choice of an academic program is an important educational decision that determines the students' motivation, engagement and future career choices. However, many students enter academic programs that are not their first choice due to financial limitations, family influence, institutional constraints and program availability. This study explored the lived experiences of non-preferred course students of Monkayo College of Arts, Sciences and Technology (MonCAST). The paper examined their experiences, challenges, motivations, coping mechanisms and perceptions of engaging in programs that were not their first choice. A qualitative phenomenological research design was used. Eight college students were purposefully selected and interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Data was analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed five major themes: (1) emotional disruption following non-preferred enrolment, (2) academic adjustment and persistence in the face of uncertainty, (3) family as the primary source of motivation, (4) cultivating appreciation through adaptation and growth, and (5) resilience and future-oriented meaning-making. Participants began with disappointment, uncertainty and academic struggles but were able to continue with challenges through family support, personal determination and future goals. In the long term, the participants valued their programs as avenues for personal and professional development. The findings indicate that while there may be emotional and academic challenges associated with beginning enrolment in a non-preferred programme, students can successfully adapt using resilience, supportive relationships and meaningful future goals. The research contributes to the increasing literature on course incongruence and has implications for academic advising, guidance services and student support programs at higher education institutions.

Keywords: non-preferred program enrollment, phenomenology, academic adjustment, resilience, student persistence, higher education

INTRODUCTION

The Problem and Its Background

Choosing an academic program is one of the most essential decisions students make as they prepare for their future jobs. Students will ideally choose curricula that are in line with their interests, abilities and long-term aims. Students who take classes aligned with their own inclinations are typically more motivated, academically engaged and satisfied. But not all students get the chance to enroll in the program of their choice. Enrollment selections are sometimes influenced by financial constraints, parental influence, admission criteria at institutions, regional accessibility, and the availability of programs. This leads to some students enrolling in academic programs that were not their first choice.

The decision to enroll in a non-preferred academic program may affect students' emotional, academic, and educational experience. Existing research has demonstrated that students who encounter an incongruence between their interests and academic programs tend to have lower motivation levels, ambiguity about career

aspirations, and difficulties in adjusting to academic responsibilities. However, many students continue to pursue their degrees despite these hurdles. As students continue to adjust, receiving support from family and classmates and developing new perspectives, they may begin to discover significance and value in their chosen studies.

While previous studies have examined students' perceptions of non-preferred courses, there is little research on college students in less prominent provincial institutions like Monkayo College of Arts, Sciences and Technology. Existing studies frequently focus on academic mismatch, strand placement or experience in bigger institutions but they do not fully capture how students in local colleges manage, persist and create meaning while staying in a course that they did not personally pick. This study therefore seeks to fill this vacuum by studying the lived experiences, obstacles, coping mechanisms and support systems of students enrolled in non-preferred courses.

Purpose of the Study

The study is a phenomenological study and the objective of this study is to explore the lived experiences of eight college students from Monkayo College of Arts, Sciences, and Technology (MonCAST) who were enrolled in academic programs that were not their first choice. The study particularly seeks to understand how the institution's limited program alternatives and practical reasons such as financial considerations, accessibility, family influence and the necessity to continue studying lead them to take on a non-preferred course. It also aims to uncover the challenges people face, how they cope and why they continue in a program that does not match their own interests.

The study through the narratives of the students seeks to provide insights that could perhaps help to better academic advising, career advice and student support services in MonCAST notably for students suffering enrollment in non-preferred programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Course Preference and Non-Preferred Program Enrollment. The choice of an academic program is a major educational decision for students that affects their academic involvement, motivation, satisfaction, and future career directions. Course preference is an indication of the match between the students' interests, abilities, values, and long-term aspirations. Research consistently shows that students who enter programs consistent with their interests are more likely to show greater academic engagement, persistence, and satisfaction (Allen & Robbins, 2010; Tracey & Robbins, 2006).

But not every student can pursue the academic programs they wish to. External factors that influence enrolment decisions include cost, institutional admission standards, geographic accessibility, program availability, and family expectations (Porter & Umbach, 2006; Berlingieri et al., 2023). This leads to students enrolling in programs that do not match their initial interests or career aspirations.

Students in non-preferred academic programs often experience disappointment, uncertainty, decreased motivation, and difficulties in coping with academic expectations (Naquila & Doronio, 2024; Pediongco & Calaguas, 2025). The mismatch between students' personal interests and academic programs might have a detrimental effect on students' sense of belonging and academic identity. However, research also shows that some students slowly adapt to their situations and develop appreciation to their programs through significant experiences, new opportunities, and supportive educational environments (Silver, 2023).

Previous literature has looked into factors associated with course selection and persistence in academics. Much of the literature available today is focused on academic results, retention rates, and career congruence. Few have paid attention to how students experience and make sense of enrolling in non-preferred programs. This highlights the importance of qualitative research on students' lived experiences and meaning-making as they negotiate their educational journeys.

Student Motivation and Persistence. Students' motivation is an important predictor of academic engagement and persistence when facing challenges and setbacks. When people's needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met, they tend to be motivated over the long haul (Deci & Ryan, 2000, Self-Determination Theory). Students who are unable to enroll in their preferred academic programs may initially have less intrinsic motivation because they feel constrained in their educational choices.

There are intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors that affect students' persistence. Intrinsic motivation is about personal interest, enjoyment, and satisfaction. Extrinsic motivation is about external rewards, expectations and obligations. Past research has found that students in non-preferred programs are often persisting due to family expectations, financial investments, future job prospects, and the desire to complete a degree (Allen et al., 2008; Tinto, 2012).

Recent studies also indicate that students who adapt well to non-preferred programs often discover other sources of motivation, including personal growth, academic success, and future career opportunities (Calaranan, 2025). Results such as these suggest that motivation is dynamic and may change as students experience new experiences and perspectives within their academic programs.

Family Influence and Financial Constraints. Family and economic conditions continue to be among the most powerful determinants of educational decision-making. In many collectivist societies, success in education is not only an individual achievement but a family obligation and aspiration. Parents often play a role in students' educational trajectories by providing emotional, financial, and motivational support.

Students may choose programs that are seen as practical, available, or financially rewarding due to family expectations, even though they are not in line with their personal interests (Jiang et al., 2014). Similarly, financial barriers often limit students' educational opportunities, especially when preferred courses of study involve relocation, higher tuition fees, or additional costs.

There are many studies that have shown that financial constraints are one of the main reasons why students take up programs that they do not prefer (Naquila & Doronio, 2024; Pediongco & Calaguas, 2025). Financial barriers can limit educational opportunities, but they can also strengthen students' determination to push through and take advantage of whatever options are available. Family support and financial realities, therefore become both constraints and motivators in the educational experiences of students.

Academic Adjustment and Resilience. Academic adjustment is the ability of students to adapt to the institutional expectations, learning environments, and academic responsibilities. Students enrolled in non-preferred programs often experience adjustment problems because they are not interested in the course content, lack familiarity with the subject matter, and are unsure about the direction of their future career.

These challenges can lead to lower confidence, reduced engagement in schoolwork, and emotional difficulties. However, resilience helps students to overcome these obstacles effectively. Resilience is defined as the ability of an individual to respond positively to adversity, stress or significant challenge (Shenton, 2004).

Research indicates that resilient students are more likely to develop effective coping strategies, seek social support and reframe difficult situations as opportunities for growth and personal development (Nowell et al., 2017). Recent Philippine research also indicates that students in non-desired programs are often resilient by virtue of perseverance, family encouragement, and slow acceptance of their educational situation (Calaranan, 2025; Pediongco & Calaguas, 2025).

Student Support and Guidance Services. Student support services are essential in helping students who are struggling academically and personally. Guidance counsellors, academic advisers, faculty members and peer support systems also help students a lot to adjust and persist.

Good academic advising enables students to better understand program requirements, explore career options and make informed educational decisions. Counselling services also offer emotional support to students who are uncertain, anxious or dissatisfied with their academic programmes (Chireshe, 2012).

Higher education institutions are increasingly being urged to have proactive interventions in place to identify students who are struggling with course incongruence and provide support in a timely manner. Mentoring programs, career guidance initiatives, academic advising services, and peer support groups have proven effective in bolstering students' confidence, persistence, and overall educational experiences (UNESCO, 2021).

Research Gap

Although the literature on course preference, academic motivation, and student persistence is expanding, most prior research has focused on quantitative measures such as academic achievement, retention, and career fit. Not much research has been undertaken on the lived experiences of students who continue to pursue programs that were not their first choice. Moreover, phenomenological studies are still lacking in the Philippine higher education context on how students interpret, cope, and make meaning of their enrolment in non-preferred academic programs.

Much of the previous research has been concerned with factors influencing course choice and academic persistence, but little attention has been given to the emotional, academic, and motivational processes experienced by students throughout their educational journey. This gap points to the need for a qualitative in-depth exploration of students' experiences in non-preferred programs. Thus, this study aims to contribute to the literature by providing in-depth descriptions of students' challenges, coping mechanisms, motivations, and perceptions while they are enrolled in academic programs that were not their first program of choice.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

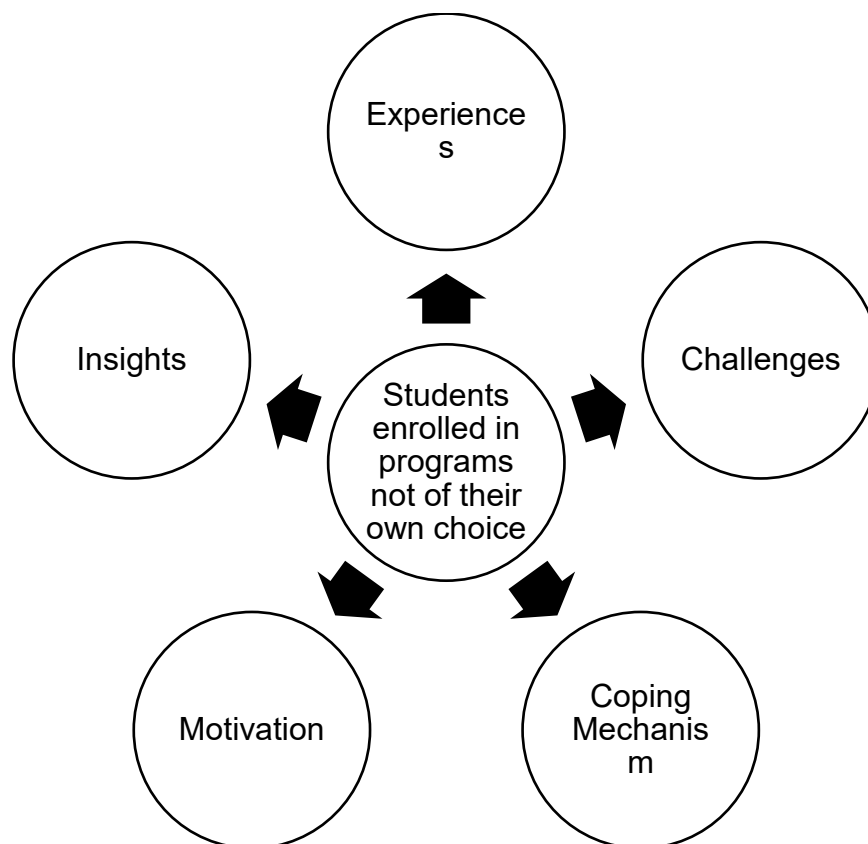


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Students' Experiences In Non-Preferred Academic Program Enrollment

The conceptual framework of this study illustrates the major dimensions explored in understanding the lived experiences of students enrolled in academic programs that were not their first choice. At the center of the framework are students who found themselves pursuing non-preferred academic programs due to various personal and contextual circumstances.

The framework focuses on five interconnected components that emerged from the literature and guided the inquiry: experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, motivation, and insights. Experiences refer to the emotional and academic realities encountered by students upon enrolling in programs that were not their preferred choice. Challenges encompass the difficulties they faced in adjusting to unfamiliar academic environments, course requirements, and personal expectations.

Coping mechanisms are the ways and behaviours students use to face and overcome the difficulties of non-preferred enrolment. Motivation is defined as the internal and external factors that motivate them to continue their studies despite the obstacles and dissatisfaction. Lastly, insights are the realisations, lessons learned, and personal growth that came out of their experience in their academic journey.

Within this framework, the interaction of these five dimensions accounts for students' experiences of non-preferred programs. By confronting challenges, employing coping mechanisms, remaining motivated, and reflecting on their experiences, students gain meaningful insights that help them adapt, build resilience, and continue to pursue academic success.

METHODS

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research approach to explore and comprehend the lived experiences of students in academic programs that were not their first choice. The study employed a phenomenological approach consistent with Creswell and Poth (2018), who emphasized phenomenology as appropriate for exploring the lived experiences and meanings of individuals regarding a shared phenomenon. Phenomenology was considered appropriate since it is concerned with recording the personal experiences, perceptions and interpretations of a given occurrence by the participants. Using this technique, the study explored how students managed intellectual, emotional, and personal problems encountered in pursuing degrees they did not expect to pursue. The study featured eight college students who were enrolled in programs that were not their first choice. Participants were selected using a purposive selection technique to guarantee they had direct experience related to the issue under inquiry. They should be currently enrolled in a programme other than their intended one and willing to discuss their experiences, where the eligibility conditions.

Data Collection Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. An interview guide was developed to direct the discussion and, at the same time, provide the participants with the opportunity to comment on their experiences. Interviews examined participants' feelings, motivations, obstacles, coping strategies, and attitudes about being placed in non-preferred programs. The data that were obtained were subjected to thematic analysis. Interview transcripts were read repeatedly to uncover common themes, important statements, and meaningful experiences. Similar responses were collated and classified into categories, which were then developed into themes that reflected the common experiences of the participants.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the procedures suggested by Braun and Clarke (2022). After each interview, the recordings were transcribed, read repeatedly, coded, and grouped into emerging themes that reflected the participants' shared experiences. The data will be subject to thematic analysis to investigate

emerging themes, patterns, and viewpoints of the students' experiences. Similar and dissimilar replies were clustered and formed the basis for analysis and conclusions.

Data Saturation

Data were collected until data saturation was reached. Saturation was reached with the seventh interview, where no new themes, categories, or significant insights emerged from the participants' narratives. A further eighth interview was conducted to validate thematic consistency and adequacy of data collected.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants

Participant	Sex	First-Choice Program	Current Program
P1	Female	Bachelor of Science in Criminology	Bachelor of Science in Business Administration Major in Marketing Management (BSBA-MM)
P2	Female	Bachelor of Arts in Political Science	Bachelor of Secondary Education Major in Social Studies (BSEd-SS)
P3	Female	Bachelor of Science in Accountancy	Bachelor of Science in Business Administration Major in Financial Management (BSBA-FM)
P4	Female	Bachelor of Physical Education	Bachelor of Science in Agriculture
P5	Female	Bachelor of Secondary Education Major in Mathematics	Bachelor of Science in Business Administration Major in Human Resource Management (BSBA-HRM)
P6	Female	Bachelor of Science in Criminology	Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEEd)
P7	Male	Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEEd)	Bachelor of Secondary Education Major in Mathematics (BSEd-Math)
P8	Female	Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEEd)	Bachelor of Secondary Education Major in English (BSEd-English)

The demographic profile of the participants included in the study is presented in Table 1. Seven females and one male participated in the study; they were enrolled in academic programs other than their initial course preference. Their preferred programs were in various fields such as Criminology, Political Science, Accountancy, Physical Education, and Teacher Education. The diversity of academic backgrounds provided rich descriptions of the lived experiences of students enrolling in non-preferred academic programs.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics review body prior to data collection. The purpose of the research was explained to the participants, participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any stage without penalty. All participants gave informed consent before the interviews took place. Ethical principles concerning voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and informed consent were observed throughout the study (Resnik, 2020). To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, participant codes (e.g., P1, P2, P3) were used instead of real names. All data from interviews were securely stored and used for research purposes only.

Ensuring Trustworthiness

The researcher utilised the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to ensure the trustworthiness of the study; they are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Extended engagement with participants and member checking of interview responses increased credibility. Rich and detailed descriptions of participants' experiences facilitated transferability. Consistency in documenting data collection and analysis procedures established dependability. An audit trail was kept to confirmability, and interpretations were based on the actual stories of the participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme	Description	Representative Quote
Emotional Disruption Following Non-Preferred Enrollment	Initial disappointment and uncertainty	"I felt disappointed and a bit lost."
Academic Adjustment and Persistence Amid Uncertainty	Adapting to academic challenges	"It was really hard to adapt."
Family as the Primary Source of Motivation	Family support as driving force	"My family is my main motivation."
Developing Appreciation Through Adaptation and Growth	Gradual acceptance and appreciation	"I learned to appreciate the course."
Resilience and Future-Oriented Meaning-Making	Looking beyond present challenges	"I can succeed even in a path I did not originally choose."

Table 2. Summary of Themes

Theme 1: Emotional Disruption Following Non-Preferred Enrollment

The participants reported experiencing emotional distress when they were to be enrolled in academic programs other than their first choice. In the beginning stages of enrolment, the common emotional reactions were disappointment, confusion, uncertainty, frustration, and self-doubt. Many participants had already seen themselves on different academic and career tracks and found it difficult to accept their new educational realities.

Participant 3 shared:

"I felt disappointed and a bit lost. It was hard to accept because I had already imagined myself in a different course."

The findings indicate that the inability to pursue a preferred academic program may have negative implications for students' psychological well-being and sense of autonomy. Self-Determination Theory argues that people are more motivated and satisfied when they feel they have control over important decisions in their lives (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Restrictions on educational choices, on the other hand, may lead to feelings of frustration and reduced intrinsic motivation.

The findings are consistent with the study of Naquila and Doronio (2024), who observed that students in non-preferred strands initially faced uncertainty and dissatisfaction. Similarly, Pediongco and Calaguas (2025) found that students in non-preferred programs often encountered emotional adjustment difficulties during the early stages of their academic journeys. The present study adds to the literature by demonstrating that emotional disruption is an initial response to incongruence in the course but does not necessarily determine long-term academic outcomes.

Theme 2: Academic Adjustment and Persistence Amid Uncertainty

Participants identified that there were a number of academic challenges with their choice of non-preferred programs. These challenges included low interest in course content, difficulty in understanding lessons, lack of motivation, uncertainty about future careers, and a decrease in confidence in their academic abilities.

Participant 3 explained:

“It was really hard to adapt. I attended my classes and did my best over time, but it felt like I was just complying rather than genuinely learning.”

Despite these challenges, the participants exhibited perseverance by attending classes regularly, fulfilling academic requirements, and gradually acclimatising to their learning environment. Their narratives suggested that adjustment was neither immediate nor a single event, but rather a gradual process through exposure to course-related experiences and sustained academic engagement.

The results are consistent with Tinto’s (2012) theory of student persistence, which posits that persistence is built through ongoing academic and social integration. Similarly, Allen et al. (2008) noted that students’ commitment to educational goals generally impacts their ability to persist through academic challenges.

The findings also suggest that adjustment should be seen as a developmental process rather than a single event. Some participants may have started out feeling uncertain, but through continued involvement in their academic programs they were able to develop competence and confidence. This finding is consistent with prior research suggesting that students can adapt well to non-preferred educational settings when given opportunities for engagement and support (Silver, 2023).

Theme 3: Family as the Primary Source of Motivation

Family was the greatest incentive for the participants to pursue studies even when dissatisfied with the academic program. Participants consistently reported parental sacrifices, financial support, emotional encouragement and family expectations as sources of motivation.

Participant 1 stated:

“My main motivation is my family. They are the reason why I continue even if this is not my first choice.”

The findings underscore the important role of family in the educational experiences of Filipino students. In collectivist cultures such as the Philippines, educational achievement is often considered as a family responsibility and a way to improve collective well-being. Therefore, students frequently balance their own aspirations with the expectations and dreams of their families.

These findings are consistent with the findings of Jiang et al. (2014) who found that perceived social support has a positive effect on academic motivation and achievement. Similarly, Calaranan (2025) discovered that students who are diverted to alternative academic pathways frequently depend on family encouragement and support to maintain their academic persistence.

This study adds to the existing literature by showing that family support is not only an external influence on educational decisions but also an ongoing source of resilience within students’ academic paths. Family support seems to reduce the emotional impact of non-preferred enrolment among students and strengthen their commitment to earning their degrees.

Theme 4: Developing Appreciation Through Adaptation and Growth

Although students were initially dissatisfied with their academic programs, many eventually came to appreciate their courses as they gained experience and familiarity with their learning environment. This appreciation was developed through relationships with caring teachers, relevant classroom experiences, hands-on learning experiences, and exposure to potential career paths.

Participant 1 remarked:

“Over time, I learned to appreciate the course. I realized that Marketing is actually important and useful.”

Participants also reported finding hitherto unknown skills, interests, and strengths. Their experiences suggest that views of academic programs may evolve as students are exposed to more course content and professional opportunities.

The results are in support of the work of Schelfhout et al. (2019), who stressed the role of person-environment interactions in educational satisfaction and academic engagement. Similarly, Silver (2023) observed that students tend to reframe their educational experiences as they are exposed to new learning opportunities.

The theme implies that appreciation does not necessarily depend on the initial preference. Appreciation, however, can be developed through extended engagement, positive experiences, and successful adaptation. These results challenge the assumption that being enrolled in a non-preferred program is necessarily associated with long-term dissatisfaction.

Theme 5: Resilience and Future-Oriented Meaning-Making

The final theme reflects participants' ability to build resilience and find positive meaning in their educational experiences. Although there was initial disappointment and academic challenges, participants consistently mentioned future aspirations, career goals, financial stability, and personal growth as motivations to continue their studies.

Participant 8 explained:

“I want to prove to myself that I can succeed even in a path I did not originally choose.”

They showed that they could see adversity as a chance to grow and become better versions of themselves. They began to consider what might be possible for them in the future and how they could develop themselves, rather than simply lamenting what they had missed out on by not entering their preferred programs.

These findings are consistent with Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), which emphasises the role of self-efficacy and goal-directed behaviour in maintaining motivation and persistence. Students who are confident in their ability to overcome challenges are more likely to persevere in the face of obstacles and setbacks.

Moreover, the results correspond to the study of Calaranan (2025) and Pediongco and Calaguas (2025), who claimed that students in the non-preferred academic track tend to develop resilience through adaptation, support systems, and future-mindedness.

The present study contributes to the literature by demonstrating how students transform initial experiences of disappointment into opportunities for personal growth. Their stories suggest that resilience is not simply the ability to survive challenges but also the ability to develop meaningful interpretations of educational experiences that enable continued success.

Implications Of the Study

The findings of this study have important implications for higher education institutions, academic advisors, guidance counsellors, and policy makers. Colleges and universities should improve academic advising and career guidance programs to help students make educated decisions about their education and to deal with course incongruence. Early identification of students in non-preferred programs can help schools intervene in time to address adjustment difficulties and promote academic persistence.

In addition, institutions can explore the development of mentoring programs, peer-support programs, and counselling services aimed at students experiencing dissatisfaction with their academic programs. Strengthening these support systems can develop students' resilience, academic engagement, and overall educational experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of students in academic programs that were not their first choice. Results showed that participants experienced emotional distress such as disappointment, uncertainty, frustration, and self-doubt when they realised that they were unable to follow their preferred courses. Besides these emotional difficulties, there were also academic problems such as low interest in the course material, problems with adaptation, and uncertainty about future career plans.

But despite these challenges, the participants showed great persistence and resilience. The most important motivating factor in their decision to continue their studies was family support. Through consistent effort, adaptation, and meaningful learning experiences, participants gradually developed respect for their programs and identified opportunities for personal and professional growth. Their stories show that success in education is not only about making the right choice of course at the beginning but also about the ability of students to adapt, to persevere, and to make meaning of their situation.

The study further highlights the importance of guidance services, academic advising, and institutional support systems in assisting students who experience course incongruence. Higher education institutions, even those with non-preferred programs, can intervene in timely ways and create supportive learning environments that help students cope with academic challenges and achieve positive educational outcomes.

Ultimately, the findings demonstrate the capacity of students to turn initial disappointment into resilience and growth oriented towards the future. Their experiences highlight the importance of support systems, self-determination, and adaptive coping mechanisms for persistence and academic achievement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on the findings of the study:

For Higher Educational Institutions

Institutions should enhance academic advising and career guidance programs to assist students in making informed choices about their education and overcoming challenges in enrolling in non-preferred programs.

For Academic Advisers & Guidance Counsellors.

Students who are experiencing dissatisfaction or adjustment problems relating to their academic programs should be provided with opportunities for regular counselling, mentoring, and career development activities.

For Faculty

Instructors should foster positive learning environments that promote engagement, positive academic experiences, and confidence for all students, regardless of students' initial program preferences.

For the Students.

Students should be encouraged to develop adaptive coping strategies, to seek social support, and to be receptive to opportunities for growth in their academic programmes.

For Future Researchers

Future studies may investigate similar experiences with larger numbers of participants, other academic disciplines, or mixed-method designs to better understand long-term outcomes of non-preferred program enrolment on academic and career outcomes.

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APPENDIX A

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. What was your first-choice academic program?
2. Why were you unable to enroll in your preferred program?
3. How did you feel when you learned that you would enroll in a different program?
4. What challenges did you encounter after enrolling in your current program?
5. How did you cope with those challenges?
6. What factors motivated you to continue your studies?
7. How has your perception of your current program changed over time?
8. What lessons have you learned from your experience?
9. What advice would you give to students experiencing a similar situation?

Probing Questions

- Can you tell me more about that experience?
- How did that make you feel?
- What happened next?
- Could you provide an example?
- Why do you think that happened?