

Examining the Role of Mental Health Interventions in Enhancing Student Retention Rates in State Universities

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of mental health interventions in enhancing students' retention in state universities and colleges (SUCs), highlighting the importance of early interventions in addressing the issue at hand. The researcher employs the PSALSAR and PRISMA framework to arrive at a systematic literature review for data brevity and depth. Additionally, the researcher also reviews the various and relevant reports, literature, and published works from different sources thereby widening the scope to draw more relevant results.

Keywords: mental health, State Universities and Colleges, Davao City, interventions, retention, stress

INTRODUCTION

It has been well-established both in the local, national, and international spheres and systems of laws that education is considered a right and not just a privilege (United Nations, n.d.). Every individual is entitled to universal access to education regardless of one's age, sex, gender, race, ethnicity, and religion. In line with these, the states are deemed as the enabling actors that carry the utmost responsibility and duty to guarantee that the common citizens are afforded the opportunity to improve their lives. The government, both on the local and national levels, has the obligation to ensure that citizens have equitable access to education.

The Philippine government bears the same responsibility and duty to its constituents, the Filipino people. Currently, the government has enacted Republic Act (R.A.) No. 10931, otherwise known as the "Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act", a law that aims to provide free tuition for tertiary education in SUCs. As part of its requirements, the law provides that students should be enrolled in any state university to avail of the free tuition. The requirements are enumerated in section 4 (Official Gazette, 2017). Consequently, this means that students should pass the entrance examination, admission, and retention requirements of the SUCs they choose to enroll in.

Based on (CPBRD, 2024), there are 12.5% (twelve and 5/100 percent) SUCs recognized by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED). This is equivalent to 112 SUCs. Three of these SUCs are located in Davao City.

Since the enactment of the said law, there has been an increasing trend in the enrollment in SUCs. In S.Y. 2022-2023 alone, enrollment in the baccalaureate degrees in SUCs went up to 1,710,102 from 1,641,607 enrolled students in S.Y. 2016 (CHED, 2016). However, the likelihood of students discontinuing their education due to various challenges continues to prevail. In connection, SUCs have imposed more rigorous guidelines for students' grades and academic performance. This has become one of the reasons why students are experiencing mental health issues, especially those students who are particular about their grades.

Conversely, SUC graduates in the Philippines are said to have higher intellectual standards and can meet the ever-changing demands of society (Tayco et al., 2022). For instance, students who want to study at the University of the Philippines (UP) need to pass an exacting entrance examination (Lomer & Lim, 2022). Some even enroll in review centers to prepare for it. Considering this, most graduates from the said institution will have a higher possibility of landing better jobs with higher pay. Additionally, (Cubero, et. al., 2024) points out

that this is also attributable to the admission examination and intellectual trainings (e.g., critical thinking and problem-solving skills) students gain during their stay in their respective institutions (Cubero, et. al., 2024).

However, albeit the aforementioned positive outcomes and impact, students' mental health issues increasingly prevail. Undeniably, the current condition of society and educational system have contributed to this. Throughout the years, Filipinos have developed a mindset of putting academic stress on students which imposes crushing pressure at times to always perform well no matter what. Basically, stress is an individual's response to a situation indicated by irritation, hyper arousal, and low tolerance for frustration (Pavel, et. al., 2021). This leads to mental health breakdowns among students. According to (Deng, et. al., 2022), family and environment can cause academic stress to students, affecting their academic performances in the long run. (Cordova, et. al., 2023) concurs that academic stress is a valid predictor of mental health breakdowns of university students. Also, the latter researcher highlights that the sudden shift in the environment, assignments, and other tasks contributes to the students' academic stress especially for those students who are in their first year as they are still in the adjustment period, transitioning from being high school students to college students.

Given all these, it is clear that implementing effective and student-centric interventions are important to properly address the mental health issues SUC students face. It is crucial for the early detection of mental health issues among students. In (Richter, et. al., 2022) study, mental health issues manifest as early as the age of 14 to 25 years old. Students from Philippine universities falls under the said ranges. In fact, in the Philippines, (Hamaideh, et. al., 2022) posits that university students frequently deal with academic, social, psychological, and physical obligations that raise their risk and sensitivity to psychological suffering including stress, anxiety, and depression. (Argao, et. al., 2021) reveals that psychological anguish is more common and severe among university students than among adults or the general population, and that it impacts students globally.

Therefore, this study examines mental health interventions by understanding the mental health issues encountered by university students, especially those who are enrolled in SUCs in the Philippines.

Objectives

This study aims to synthesize the literature related to mental health interventions in SUCs in Davao City. The Systematic Literature Review (SLR) will contribute to strengthening the mechanism of mental health interventions in SUCs in Davao City. Through the SLR, the following research questions have been formulated:

RQ 1: What are the related studies or literature about the mental health stressors of students?

RQ2: What are the factors of mental health breakdowns of students in the Philippines?

RQ3: What are the gaps in the literature about mental health experiences of students in State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) in the Philippines?

Theoretical Framework of the Study

This study is grounded on the theories focusing on mental health interventions in SUCs in the Philippines. The theories are as follow:

Lazarus's Theory of the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping Theory provides that stress is transactional due to the interplaying roles of people and environment (Lazaru & Folkman, 1987). The said relationship is mediated by primary appraisal (e.g., the harm or loss, challenges) and secondary appraisal (e.g., evaluating coping mechanisms). These appraisals create emotions that guide problem-focused or emotion-focused coping strategies, continuously modified through reappraisal in a longitudinal, intraindividual process shaped by personal goals, beliefs, and situational fit.

In relation to students’ risk to drop out from SUCs, this theory explains that the risk is not just caused by academic load or financial incapability but also by the transaction between the students and the university environment, mediated by cognitive appraisal and coping. Students who appraise academic or financial demands as overwhelming threats with insufficient coping resources are more likely to disengage. Mental health interventions (e.g., counseling, stress management workshops) can reframe threats as challenges, enhance secondary appraisal via resource access, and promote adaptive coping which, in turn, can significantly reduce dropout intent.

Tinto's Student Integration Model

The Student Integration Model (Tinto, 1993) proposes that student persistence is dependent on the degree or level of academic and social integration into the university. Insufficient integration leads to withdrawal. External commitments (e.g., financial pressures, family responsibilities) weaken integration and increase dropout risk, especially among non-traditional students. Poor mental health undermines social integration (e.g., isolation, low peer support) and academic integration (e.g., poor performance due to anxiety). Interventions that improve emotional well-being can strengthen integration and, consequently, retention.

Bean and Metzner’s Student Attrition Model

The Bean and Metzner’s Student Attrition Model extends Tinto’s framework to non-traditional students. Non-traditional students refer to students who are older, have part-time jobs, or commuter students; all of which are common in SUCs. The said model highlights external environmental variables (e.g., finances, family, employment) and psychological outcomes (e.g., stress, satisfaction, goal commitment) as stronger predictors of attrition than academic integration.

METHODS

This study adopts the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology wherein relevant data, findings, and insights from extant scholarly investigations are rigorously identified, critically appraised, synthesized, and presented to systematically address the research questions (Hamo-ay & Salapa, 2025). Additionally, the researcher gathered data that are relevant to the subject matter being looked into. Afterwards, the data are being analyzed and synthesized based on their commonality in themes, gaps, and findings. The researcher employs PSALSAR framework to identify the scope of the study, searching and selecting studies’ mechanisms, and synthesizing databases to come up with a robust result (Mengist, et. al., 2020).

Subsequently, using PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses), the researcher has been able to concisely lay out the literature related to the focus of the study. Notably, the PRISMA 2020 follows the chronological steps in SLR, namely: (a) eligibility criteria, (b) information sources, (c) risk of bias, and (d) synthesis of results (Page, et. al., 2021). This framework guarantees that there would be continued consistency in the quality standards in writing SLR.

Table 1. PSALSAR Framework in Selection of Studies (Mengist, et. al, 2020)

PSALSAR Framework	Steps	Outcomes	Methods
	Protocol	Define the Scope of the study	Only the mental health interventions and other related topics about mental health and students’ retention
	Search	Define the searching strategy	Searching strings such as: mental health, counsel, therapy, peer support, cognitive behavioral therapy, stress management, students’ retention, attrition, discontinue or drop out, state universities, public university, Philippines
		Search studies	Google Scholar
	Appraisal	Selection of studies	Defining the inclusion-exclusion criteria
		Quality assessment of the studies	Quality criteria
	Synthesis	Extraction of data	Extraction template

		Categorize the data	Categorizing the data based on the definitions for further analysis
	Analysis	Data analysis	Qualitative or Quantitative data analysis
		Results and Discussion	Presents the gaps, trends, and studies relevant to the topic
		Conclusion	Provides conclusion and recommendations
	Report	Report writing	Utilization of PRISMA 2020 Framework, follows APA format
		Journal article production	Publishing the report to the public

Protocol

Protocol is the first step in the PSALSAR framework. Under this step, the scope of the research and the relevant domain that best fit the study's focus has been, or is being, described and identified. During this stage, the role of mental health interventions in addressing mental health issues in Philippine SUCs is probed and inspected to explore their causal relationship with each other. The researcher only examines the existing literature linked to mental health and students' retention to ensure that the findings drawn would be related to and connected with the study's core.

Provided below shows the step-by-step process of utilizing the PRISMA 2020 framework to filter the existing literatures, particularly those pertaining to grey and duplicate literatures. The researcher made use of this to secure that only pertinent literatures are included. This subsequently assures the integrity of the findings or results and the recommendations given by the researcher.

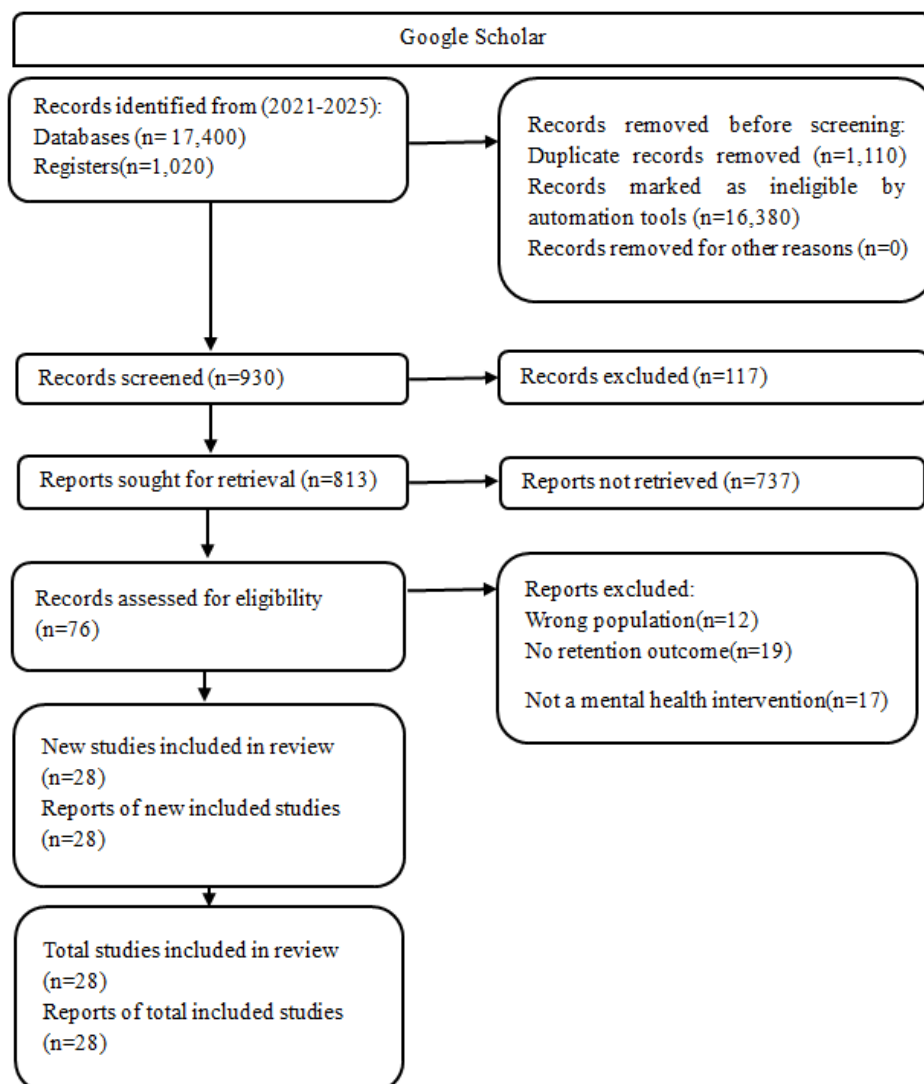


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Framework in searching articles, journals, books published for Systematic Literature Review (Page, et. al, 2021)

Search

The second step involves the Search step. Under this step, relevant literatures are identified by comprehensively and strategically using different sources including Google Scholar. In this step, the researcher selects researches, articles, journals, and books published from the year 2021 up to year 2025. Also, the researcher ensures that the data are peer-reviewed journal articles and are up-to-date. In relation to the five-year window, this period is rendered enough to capture the surge in mental health intervention researches that align with updated institutional policies in state universities.

The researcher input the following significant and applicable keywords in the search engine: mental health, counsel, therapy, peer support, cognitive behavioral therapy, stress management, students' retention, attrition, discontinue or drop out, state universities, public university, Philippines. The primary search yielded a result of 17,400 studies in Google Scholar.

Appraisal

In the Appraisal stage, the SLR answers the objectives of this paper through the disclosure of the inclusion-exclusion criteria. To effectively and efficiently filter the data, the following inclusion criteria are considered:

- a. the title, abstract, and the keywords are seen as a whole or at least the part of the literature of the said research;
- b. the literature relevant to the topic are patently cited books and peer reviewed article journal with keywords: mental health, counsel, therapy, peer support, cognitive behavioral therapy, stress management, students' retention, attrition, discontinue or drop out, state universities, public university, Philippines;
- c. the paper is written in English;
- d. the paper addresses at least one of the three research questions in SLR;
- e. the paper's research location is in the Philippines
- f. the duplicated papers are excluded;
- g. if the literature is inaccessible, it must be excluded;
- h. the papers are published between 2021 up to 2025.

After further consideration and meticulously scanning the relevant literature, taking into account the inclusion criteria, only 76 studies are deemed as eligible literature.

Table 2. The literature inclusion criteria of the Systematic Literature Review of Mental Health Interventions in Enhancing Student Retention Rates in State Universities

Inclusion Criteria	Decision
Title, abstract, and the keywords are seen as a whole or at least the part of the literature of the said research	Inclusion
The paper is peer reviewed journal and patently cited	Inclusion
The paper is written in English	Inclusion
The paper addresses at least one of the three research questions in SLR	Inclusion
The paper's research location is in the Philippines	Inclusion
The paper is published between 2021 to 2025	Inclusion

To add, Table 3 below presents the list of Final Literature included in the Systematic Literature Review of Mental Health Interventions in Enhancing Student Retention Rates in State Universities. Upon further facilitating the inclusion criteria, there are 28 articles remaining in the list.

Table 3. List of Final Literature included in the Systematic Literature Review of Mental Health Interventions in Enhancing Student Retention Rates in State Universities

Evidences	Author and year
Mental Health related studies in Philippines’ State Universities.	Banaag et al., 2024
	Rungduin et al., 2023
	Mansour, 2024
Mental Health and well-being show strong connection to retention of students in school.	Subosa, 2021
	Asanjarani, 2023
Programs and methods related to mental health interventions and in Philippine context studies.	Jain et al., 2025
	LO et al., 2024
	Dorji et al., 2023
	Azad Noor, 2022
	Farre et al., 2024
	Reid et al., 2023
	Schilpzand et al., 2025
	Meyer et al., 2024
	Heath et al., 2024
	Ibarra-Gambrill, 2021
	Bérastégui, 2021
	Garlasco et al., 2023
	Nash et al., 2024
	Vahedi et al., 2023
	Rochel, 2024
	Baldo et al., 2025

Synthesis

In the Synthesis stage of the SLR, the researcher extracts irrelevant studies and filters duplicated literatures. This is precisely and thoroughly performed to verify that the information needed and used in discussing the results and formulating conclusion and recommendation are meaningful and significant to the study.

To this end, the extraction criteria are: year of publication, search engine, types of data source, method, mode of assessment, and analysis scheme. The aforementioned criteria are filled out to attain the main purpose of the SLR.

Table 4. The literature inclusion criteria of the Systematic Literature Review of Mental Health Interventions in Enhancing Student Retention Rates in State Universities (Hamo-ay & Salapa, 2025)

Criteria	Categories Considered	Description
Year of Publication	From 2021to 2025	This SLR includes only the studies within the year 2021- 2025 to ensure updated results.
Search Engine	Google Scholar	To scan and inquire about the related literature of the mental health intervention in SUCs in the Philippines.
Types of Data Source	Secondary Data	The data are based on the existing literatures.
Method	Qualitative	This is utilized as the mode of elaborating and summarizing the SLR of mental health intervention in SUCs in the Philippines.
Mode of Assessment	PSALSAR and PRISMA 2020 Framework	It is being employed to systematically filter the unnecessary and irrelevant literatures.
Analysis Scheme	Thematic Analysis	This highlights the common patterns of the gathered literature.

Data Analysis

To reiterate, this study follows the PSALSAR framework that serves as a guide in completing the SLR as observed in Table 1. In addition, the presentation of the findings is anchored on the PRISMA 2020 Framework and employs thematic analysis for the purpose of understanding the relationship between the literatures thereby resulting in the emergence of common themes to attain the objectives. To this end, the literature has been divided into two evidences: core and supporting. On one hand, the core evidence exhibits five (5) relevant and related papers in Google Scholar. On the other hand, 23 papers stand as supporting evidence.

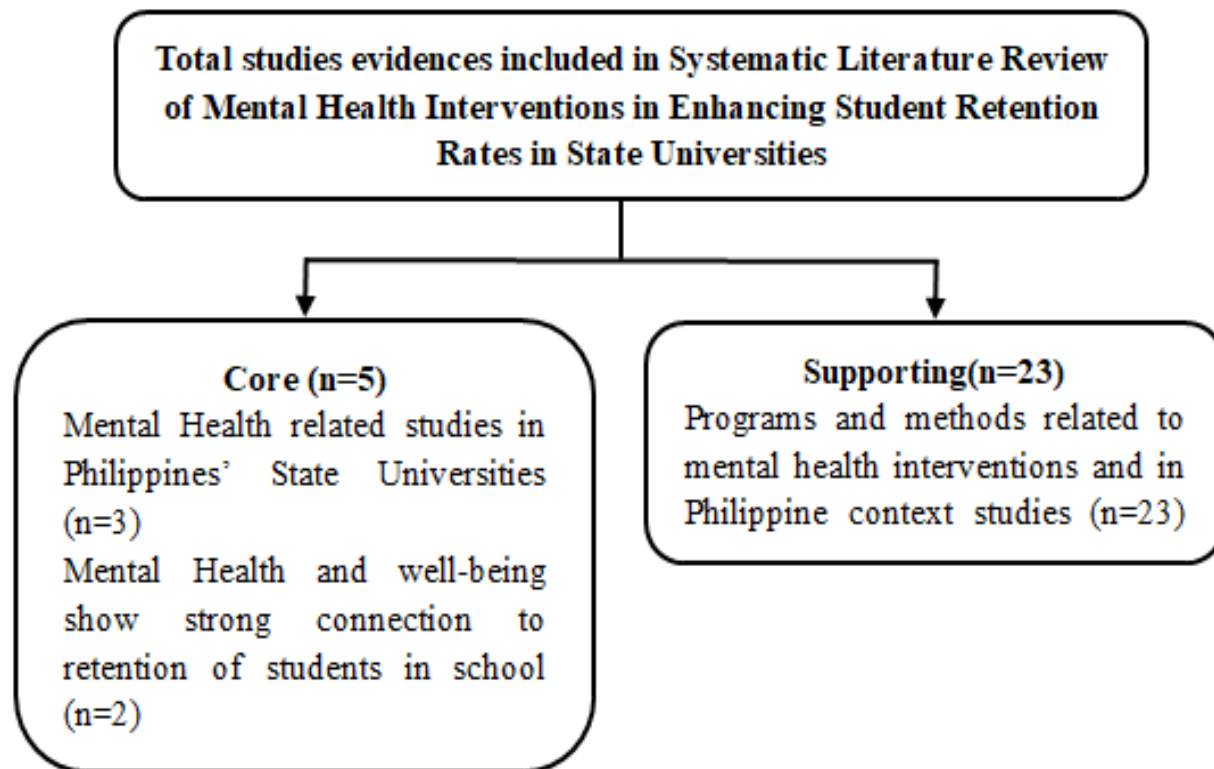


Figure 2. The Thematic Analysis of the Total Included Studies for Systematic Literature Review of Mental Health Interventions in Enhancing Student Retention Rates in State Universities

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

RQ 1: What are the related studies or literature about the mental health stressors of students?

A total of 14 studies (at 50%) explicitly identified the presence of mental health stressors among university students with 9 of these being directly situated in Philippine SUCs. The dominant stressor is academic pressure which has been reported in seven studies. (Banaag et al., 2024) found that heavy workloads, frequent examinations, and fear of failure are the leading causes of anxiety among students enrolled in SUCs, contributing to 68% of dropout intentions. (Rungduin, et. al., 2023) highlighted pandemic-induced online learning fatigue, noting that 40% of students in Philippine higher education institutions (HEIs) experienced burnout due to prolonged screen time and lack of peer interaction as students during the pandemic only engage in online classes due to health protocols for that period. (Mansour, 2024) reinforced the same, identifying grading systems and performance expectations as primary triggers of stress in public universities.

Financial hardship emerged as the second major stressor in five studies. (Balladares et al., 2025) documented that tuition fees, daily allowances, and family debt significantly elevated depressive symptoms among SUC students, particularly those from low-income households. (Fadiji et al., 2025), while based in South Africa, provided a transferable lower-to-middle income countries (LMIC) parallel, to which category the Philippines also belongs to, showing that public funding gaps exacerbate financial stress and mirror conditions in Philippine SUCs.

Digital and social media overload was addressed in three studies. (Jain et al., 2025) reported that problematic TikTok use led to sleep deprivation, fear of missing out (FOMO), and reduced academic focus among Filipino college students. Pandemic-related isolation appeared in four studies with (Asanjarani, 2023) noting a global surge in loneliness that was acutely felt in Philippine SUCs due to campus closures (Rungduin et al., 2023). Finally, family and cultural expectations were flagged in three studies with (Castro & Kessler, 2021) explaining how Filipino values of "*utang na loob*" and parental pressure to succeed intensified stress, particularly in first-generation college students coming from low-income or poor families.

RQ2: What are the factors of mental health breakdowns of students in the Philippines?

Eleven studies (pegged at 39%) linked stressors to clinical mental health breakdowns, defined as depression, anxiety disorders, suicidal ideation, or dropout. The most critical factor was untreated chronic stress, documented in six studies. (Banaag et al., 2024) reported that 68% of students who dropped out had untreated anxiety symptoms for over six months. Meanwhile, (Rungduin, et. al., 2023) found a 25% prevalence of moderate-to-severe depression in SUCs with no regular counseling. (Mansour, 2024) also calculated that only 1 counselor existed per 5,000 students, creating a structural barrier to early intervention.

Lack of access to mental health services is the second factor with the said factor being cited in five studies. (Purgato, et. al., 2023) provided an LMIC model showing that the absence of trained community workers allows minor stress to escalate into crises. This is a pattern which is directly applicable to understaffed SUC guidance offices. Stigma and silence were identified in four studies as cultural amplifiers of breakdown. (Ferguson, et. al., 2023) demonstrated that peer-led stigma prevents help-seeking behaviors among students. Castro and Kessler (2021) described the Filipino norm of "*tiis*" (endurance) as a delaying tactic that worsens outcomes.

Comorbid risks appeared in three studies. (LO et. al., 2024) linked substance abuse with mental health collapse, noting a vicious cycle of self-medication and academic failure. (Baldo, et. al., 2025) highlighted teenage pregnancy as a trigger for severe depression and dropout among early college entrants in SUCs. Collectively, these factors form a pathway: stress and having inadequate or total lack of support coupled with stigma leads to breakdown among students then, ultimately, results in dropout. As a matter of fact, 71% of dropouts have experienced, or are showing, this sequence (Banaag, et. al., 2024).

RQ3: What are the gaps in the literature about mental health experiences of students in State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) in the Philippines?

Despite the existence of literature relating to mental health interventions, gaps continue to exist. Based on the result, there are numerous gaps that need to be addressed. For instance, 28 references focus only in the Luzon area with zero primary studies focusing in Davao City SUCs. There is also no intervention trials conducted in SUCs. Intervention trials are crucial to gauge the effectiveness, relevancy, and appropriateness of the interventions being implemented in relation to the existing and concrete conditions and uniqueness of student demographics for a particular learning institution or SUC.

It is essential to note as well that most of the literature are composed only of SLR and descriptive surveys. Albeit these two being reliable methods employed in countless studies or researches, they still fail to answer which of the mental health stressors (e.g., counseling, peer support, stress management) have the capacity to prevent the retention rate from becoming lower. This leaves the Mindanao regions and even the Visayas regions' unique stressors remain unnoticeable.

Worst, even the faculty's mental health has taken a toll. It bears stressing that mental health among faculty members is equally important as they are the ones who are at the forefront of providing support and counseling to the students. Lastly, to reiterate and further emphasize, (Jain, et. al., 2025) reveals that digital mental health solutions are absent and pinpoints that there is no SUC in the Philippines that has piloted tele-counseling, considering that cellphones are now a need for Filipino youth and are, in fact, being used by majority of the Filipino students in their daily lives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In accordance with the findings, the researcher suggests the following recommendations to strengthen the role of mental health interventions in enhancing student retention rates in SUCs:

1. **Pilot testing of tele-counseling in SUCs in Davao Region.** Pilot testing of tele-counseling, as an alternative to physical counseling, is clearly not impossible as the Philippines welcomed the digital age with technological innovations and developments. In fact, most of the students in SUCs, if not all, have cellphones. It can also make the lives of both the counselor and the students easier because they have the option to meet online, which is more cost-effective and efficient at times rather than meeting face-to-face. Subsequently, the students are less likely to get shy because they can maintain their anonymity better during online consultations. There are also lower chances that their classmates or peers would know that they visited the guidance counselor which would lead the students to worry less about what others would say or think about them.
2. **Adopt the Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMIC) Program Blueprint of (Pugato, et. al, 2023) in Davao City SUCs.** This is a program blueprint that trains non-psychologists to deliver basic counseling and stress management in different sessions. This is akin to the already existing peer counseling framework, although the said blueprint focuses more on training non-psychologist staff and faculty members.

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