Commonness, Difficulty, and Predictor of Higher Education Student Stressors

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Abstract – *Incontestably, stress affects every facet of life and lately there is a growing concern about increased stress amongst higher education students. This descriptive study aimed to establish prevalent student stressors and their predictors. To ascertain stressors' incidence and overall difficulty, two hundred thirteen undergraduate respondents were asked to accomplish a prepared questionnaire of highly hypothesized stressors and were asked to identify items that causes them stress and its level of difficulty. Subsequently, educated profile variables were considered to find out significant stressor predictor. Findings revealed that usual student stressors were exceedingly academic-related which are apparently accentuated by the next-level quality assurance advocacy in higher education, with significant group differences across school and academic year and school as a considerable contributing factor. This suggests that a newly rationalized school- if not program-based and not largely institutional-based student stress management program may mitigate primarily the expected academic-related stress but more importantly overall student stress in general for a more satisfying university career.*

Keywords – *Stress, Stressor, Commonness, Difficulty, Predictor, Higher Education*

INTRODUCTION

Student life in the university is an opportune time not only to advance their education but also to eventually prepare themselves to the true life awaiting them in the outside world after the completion of their chosen degrees. However, university life does have many aspects as well as the stress that comes with it. It is clear that students could significantly face a significant amount of stress due to various factors.

For the past decade or so, university student stressors have been a topic of interest by researchers and educators because of its effects not only on their academic performance but also on their physiological and psychological health. The changing nature of the university's environment potentially contributes to high levels of stress amongst students that can affect their health and academic performance [1]. When stress is perceived negatively or becomes excessive, students experience physical and psychological impairment [2]. Rationally, there is increased experience of mental health issues amongst university students [3]. Increased enrollment in higher education could further highlight the occurrence of not only stress but also relative physiological and psychological issues amongst students.

Statistics show that a considerable percentage of university students are not able to finish their degrees. Certainly finances and life circumstances play into that figure, but the stress of university life cannot be ignored as a factor as well. A significant number of studies discovered increasing levels of stress experienced by the university students [4] and also documented the undesirable effect of stress on students [5]- [9].

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to determine the commonplace student stressors in terms of incidence and overall difficulty and their predictors in the current authentic higher education setting.

METHODS

This study was of a descriptive type. Initially, it involved 400 undergraduate students across the university. However, only 213 fully responded.

Instrument

Data was mainly collected through a researcher-made university student stressor questionnaire with a reliability coefficient of 0.980. The items are highly based from the draft checklist of the University Student Stress [10]. The stressors were clustered as follows: seventeen (17) items on the subject of academic, thirteen (13) items in relation to time or

balance, six (6) items with reference to work, fifteen (15) items on intrapersonal or self-sources, four (4) items about family, ten (10) items as regards relationship or interpersonal or social, ten (10) items concerning teaching quality or relations with teachers or support from teachers, eight (8) items regarding financial, and twenty (20) items about environmental or campus or administrative or transition. The reliability coefficient for each cluster are the following, respectively: 0.909, 0.745, 0.901, 0.913, 0.738, 0.889, 0.796, 0.874 and 0.936.

Commonness and Overall Difficulty of Stressors

Commonness was measured by counting the total number of occurrence a stressor was identified irrespective of the ratings. With the assumption that each respondent identifies an item only once, the highest score for an item is 213 which is equal to the total number of those who fully responded to the study. In determining the overall difficulty of each stressor, first, the five levels were weighted by giving them values based on the following: rating of 1 was given a weighted score of 5; rating of 2 was given a 4; rating of 3 was given a 3; rating of 4 was given a 2; and rating of 5 was given a 1. And finally, the overall measure of difficulty for every item was calculated using $\sum_{f,l=1}^{f=213;l=5} fl$ where f represents the frequency and l represents the weighted score. Since the highest frequency that an item would be rated in any one of the five levels was 213, the greatest value of difficulty was 213 multiplied by 5, giving a product of 1,065.

Analysis of Data

Descriptive statistics like frequencies and percentages were used to establish commonness and overall difficulty of stressors. Forward multiple regressions was employed to resolve significant predictors of commonness and overall difficulty. Finally, nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis test was used to analyze differences when grouped according to academic year, gender, and school.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile

Accordingly, the greater parts of the respondents were from the accountancy department, at second year level (28.6%), and female (64.3%) *(see Table 1)*. In general, the result is vastly reflective of the current distribution of the university's student population across the aforesaid variables while not setting aside the degree of response of the subjects to the study. Particularly in terms of sex, the distribution is consistent to the existing gender gap in higher education, which is not only true in the Philippines but is seemingly a worldwide trend, where there are more women than men enrollees [11] Improved program-based quality standards occasioned increase in enrolment though on the other hand could affect declining student year level size because of more stringent retention, grading policies among others.

Table 1. Profile of Respondents

Variable		*f (%)*
School	School of Accountancy	60 (28.2)
	School of Arts & Sciences	5 (2.3)
	School of Business	39 (18.3)
	School of Computing Sciences and Information Technology	20 (9.4)
	School of Education	25 (11.7)
	School of Engineering & Architecture	32 (15.0)
	School of Health Sciences	21 (9.9)
	School of Public Administration & Governance	11 (5.2)
Academic Year	First Year	59 (27.7)
	Second Year	61 (28.6)
	Third Year	55 (25.8)
	Fourth Year	33 (15.5)
	Fifth Year	5 (2.3)
Sex	Male	76 (35.7)
	Female	137 (64.3)

Commonness of Stressors

The decidedly identified first ten most common stressors were academic-related *(see Table 2)*. Academic related stressors are the most, if not one of the most, commonly experienced by students [12] [13] [14]. A comprehensive literature review found that time management issues, personal expectations, financial burdens among others are cited as compositions of academic stress [15]. In the Asian context, academic stress is exceedingly correlated to adolescents' self-, parent, and teacher expectations [16]. Finally, student academic stress is heightened by increased weight on academic excellence and magnified parental expectations [17], [18], [7].

Apparently, it cannot be denied that common stressors do continue to exist either because existing interventions aren't fully implemented or are outdated. Moreover, the unprecedented next-level quality assurance (QA) advocacy in general in the educational setting and the University to stay at par with the global playing field and to adhere with the most recent higher government-led outcomes- and typology-based quality assurance reform changed significantly the academic scenery and stimulated untraditional next-level academic norms. Adherence to said new scholastic demands highlighted greatly the very significance of various academic and academic-related fundamental activities characteristic of current day stressors of university life.

Overall Difficulty of Stressors

Consistently, though may not be in same arrangement, the first 10 ranked most difficult stressors were decidedly related to the compositions of scholarly burden with scores ranging from 41% to 61% (see Table 3) [19].

Interestingly, satisfying the family's expectations was deemed the most stressful of all. This highlights one of the foremost reasons why children are sent to pursue higher education. Unequaled value is given by every sending family to education as stepping stone to its success and as a legacy.

Table 2. First ten most experienced stressors.

Stressor	*f*	*f%*
1. Studying for tests and exams.	153	71.83
2. High pressure periods, when lots of assessment is due.	152	71.36
3. Fear of disappointing my family.	146	68.54
4. Meeting deadlines for academic assessment.	136	63.85
5. Handling the academic workload.	134	62.91
6. Managing my weekly budget.	133	62.44
7. Getting good grades.	130	61.03
8. Not being able to manage my time effectively.	126	59.15
9. My procrastination and laziness.	119	55.87
10. Doing oral presentations.	118	55.4

Again and again as contextualized in the previous section, the current educational setting brought academic demands to an exceptional new gravity. Presently, staying academically fit as stereotypically concretized in terms of good examination scores, timely submission of requirements among others which logically entails being able to manage time properly is made more an extraordinary task than previously. Adding to the picture, the unchanged expectation, personally and socially, to perform academically at more than usual levels and possibly the possibly limited resources especially financially, because of the increasing cost higher education, bring about amplified levels of stress.

Factors contributing to commonness and overall difficulty of stressors

Using forward multiple regression, a significant model for commonness emerged ($F_{4,213} = 4.252$, $p < 0.05$) with adjusted R square = 0.020 and for overall difficulty ($F_{4,213} = 8.921$, $p < 0.01$) with adjusted R square of 0.036, respectively *(see Table 4)*.

Academic year and gender did not significantly influence the commonness and overall difficulty of stressors. The findings do not conform to the results of previous studies in terms of age [20] and in terms of gender and study level [21]. In line with the study's initial findings on the commonness and overall difficulty of stressors, finding highlights the link between school's academic standards and the usual stressors accorded by it.

Table 3. First ten stressors based on the overall difficulty.

Stressor	Frequency with which a Stressor is Rated					Difficulty of Stressor Weighted	
	1	2	3	4	5	*f*	*f%*
1. Fear of disappointing my family.	96	30	9	3	8	641	60.19
2. High pressure periods, when lots of assessment is due.	59	46	19	14	14	578	54.27
3. Studying for tests and exams.	45	43	40	15	10	557	52.3
4. Managing my weekly budget.	57	31	25	11	9	515	48.36
5. Not being able to manage my time effectively.	51	38	22	8	7	496	46.57
6. Getting good grades.	51	33	24	14	8	495	46.48
7. Handling the academic workload.	43	39	25	18	9	491	46.1
8. Meeting deadlines for academic assessment.	35	31	32	21	17	454	42.63
9. Achieving my academic goals.	48	33	15	9	6	441	41.41
10. My procrastination and laziness.	38	39	20	13	9	441	41.41

Universities do maintain certain standards to its academic programs in accordance with set quality assurance measures. It is even more importantly true to well-performing if not nationally recognized academic programs. In detail, most of the respondents of the study were from the accountancy department. Understandably, the department employs a respectable retention policy to assure quality graduates especially for its flagship Bachelor of Science in Accountancy (BSoA) program. Again, pursuit for academic excellence for students may not just be for personal but for social reasons as well. Again, for students, adherence to set academic standards is not only merely to satisfy personal expectations but social expectations (i.e. family, friends) which are of equal importance as well. With the addition of related matter like limited financial resources, holding on to set standards and expectations could induce a sizeable number and difficulty level of commonplace academic stressors amongst students.

Table 4. Factors contributing to commonness and overall difficulty of stressors.

Predictor Variable	**Commonness**		**Overall Difficulty**	
	Beta Coefficient	*p value*	*Beta Coefficient*	*p value*
School	**-0.032***	0.041	**-0.021****	0.003

**Significant at the 0.05 level (two – tailed)*
***Significant at the 0.01 level (two – tailed)*

Comparison on Commonness and Overall Difficulty of Stressors across Academic Year

A significant difference *(see Table 5)* was observed in terms of commonness of academic stressors ($\chi 2$ (7) = 10.777, $p < 0.05$). Multiple comparisons revealed that fourth year level students experienced more commonplace academic stressors than first year level. Findings support preceding study results wherein there is observed differences by year of study in terms of stress provoking factors [22] [23]. The finding indicates that senior students do feel to a large extent the high academic demands of being in the final year of and finishing a typical 4-year degree program on time nonetheless satisfying set expectations. Closely, the academic workload of being in the concluding year of the degree program is not just spelled in terms of the characteristic assignments and examinations but drastically in terms of the added academically-related requirements like trainings, seminars, conferences, researches, and the like. The added requirements and the probable implications in terms of time management, expectations, and financial limitations among others substantially contribute and give added sense of the real academic challenges of higher education.

Table 5. The Kruskal-Wallis test on commonness and level of difficulty of stressors when grouped according to academic year

Stressor	**Commonness**			**Overall Difficulty**		
	χ^2	**df**	**sig**	χ^2	**df**	**sig**
Academic	**10.777***	3	0.029	6.739	3	0.081
Time or balance	7.965	3	0.093	1.195	3	0.754
Work	6.828	3	0.145	2.129	3	0.546
Intrapersonal/ Self	7.593	3	0.108	2.246	3	0.523
Family	8.740	3	0.068	3.446	3	0.328
Relationships/ Interpersonal/ Social	4.856	3	0.302	1.956	3	0.582
Teaching quality/ Relations with teachers/ Support from teachers	6.328	3	0.176	5.251	3	0.913
Financial	1.909	3	0.752	4.585	3	0.333
Environmental/ Campus/ Administrative/ Transition	2.625	3	0.622	2.423	3	0.912

**Significant at the 0.05 level (two – tailed)*

Comparison of Commonness and Overall Difficulty of Stressors across Gender

No significant differences were observed on the commonness and overall difficulty of stressors when grouped according to sex *(see Table 6)*. Findings confirm previous result which found no sex differences in degree of stress or most frequent stressors [24]. Yet, it disagrees with either females [9], [25], [21], [26], [23], [20] or males [22], [27]-[29] experiencing more stress.

The absence of statistical difference between the sexes underlines the actuality of gender equity in university setting. Most recently, the country achieved an Education Gini Coefficent (EGC), a scholarly measurement indicator of equity in education, of around 0.23 and 0.24 [30]. Unquestionably, the typical non gender-sensitive tertiary education system is giving every student vastly equivalent opportunities and experiences of a university life in realizing primarily set educational goals with very comparable excellence.

Table 6. The Kruskal-Wallis test on commonness and level of difficulty of stressors when grouped according to gender

Stressor	Commonness		Overall Difficulty	
	χ^2	sig	χ^2	Sig
Academic	1.009	0.315	3.660	0.545
Time or balance	4.601	0.498	5.410	0.462
Work	7.001	0.935	8.290	0.363
Intrapersonal/Self	1.401	0.708	9.600	0.757
Family	7.270	0.394	2.640	0.607
Relationships/ Interpersonal/ Social	5.100	0.821	2.410	0.624
Teaching quality/ Relations with teachers/ Support from teachers	5.180	0.471	1.800	0.894
Financial	1.002	0.521	3.810	0.537
Environmental/Campus / Administrative/ Transition	1.280	0.720	3.640	0.546

Df=1

Table 7. The Kruskal-Wallis test on commonness and level of difficulty of stressors when grouped according to gender

Stressor	Commonness		Overall Difficulty	
	χ^2	sig	χ^2	sig
Academic	**7.751***	0.035	8.065	0.327
Time or balance	11.749	0.109	4.568	0.600
Work	10.971	0.140	11.453	0.120
Intrapersonal/Self	**17.449***	0.015	6.337	0.387
Family	12.572	0.083	12.043	0.099
Relationships/ Interpersonal/ Social	**19.516***	0.007	7.802	0.253
Teaching quality/ Relations with teachers/ Support from teachers	**21.678***	0.003	8.127	0.149
Financial	**21.224****	0.003	6.559	0.364
Environmental/Campus/ Administrative/Transition	**20.272****	0.005	4.687	0.546

Df=7;
**Significant at the 0.05 level (two – tailed)*
***Significant at the 0.01 level (two – tailed)*

Comparison of Commonness and Overall Difficulty of Stressors across School

There are observed significant differences on intrapersonal/self (χ^2 (7) = 17.449, $p < 0.05$), relationships/interpersonal/social (χ^2 (7) = 19.516, $p < 0.01$), teaching quality/relations with teachers/support from teachers (χ^2 (7) = 21.678, $p < 0.01$), financial (χ^2 (7) = 21.224, $p < 0.01$), and environmental/ campus/administrative/transition (χ^2 (7) = 20.272, $p < 0.01$) in terms of commonness of stressors when grouped according to school *(see Table 7).*

The finding underscores the relation between the home school and the category of stressors experienced by the students. In an authentic university setting, at the very outset, there are fundamentally understood proscribed differences of disciplinal program offerings of the various schools. Differences expectedly translate in depth in the respective school settings particularly on academic norms. Repeatedly, the intensified next level quality assurance advocacy not only underlined further the already in placed minimum program standards but more so elevated it to the next level. To assure more competitive quality of graduates, said change in perspective brought a reasonable disparity in terms of experienced school-based stressors by the students especially for catered board programs.

CONCLUSION

The prevalence and difficulty of stressors amongst university students is still extraordinary. Interestingly, university students predominantly experience stressors specifically related to school- if not program-based scholastic demands. The stressors' prevalence and difficulty are exceedingly consonant to the progressed academic norms brought by next-level quality assurance initiatives in the higher education setting and the consequential expectations.

Future Directions

Future research should explore other educated variables that may give much deeper understanding on not only why academic year and gender don't significantly predict student stressors. There is also a need for replication involving a more reasonable number of respondents and broader setting for improved generalizations.

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