

## Breaking in or breaking down?: Culture shock among Filipino Freshmen students in a state university

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the phenomenon of culture shock among freshmen students at a Philippine state university, where education is highly valued as both a familial legacy and a personal investment. Using a phenomenological approach, the study explores the lived experiences of ten high-achieving freshmen living independently at a state university in Laguna, Philippines. Thematic analysis reveals profound academic and social challenges impacting students' academic performance, acculturation, and overall well-being. These challenges include: (1) Navigating a new academic environment and rigor; (2) Mastering time management and navigating lifestyle adjustments; (3) Managing finances and maintaining scholarships; (4) Adapting socially and culturally; (5) Managing expectations and pressure; and (6) Challenges to psychological and emotional well-being. Furthermore, the study identifies key coping strategies employed by these students, including seeking support networks – family, friends, peers, organizations, and scholarships – and developing personal adaptive mechanisms, primarily relying on self-help. These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of culture shock and offer valuable insights for university policies aimed at supporting incoming students' cultural and academic adjustment.

**Keywords:** Culture Shock, Domestic Students, Philippines, Academic Transition, Coping Strategies, Student Adjustment

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## INTRODUCTION

Education is crucial for shaping responsible citizens, equipping them with essential knowledge and skills for work and lifelong learning (Hanemann, 2015; Scott, 2015; Lövdén et al., 2020). Formal education, with emphasis on critical thinking (Luciana et al., 2024), particularly at the tertiary level, is highly valued in the Philippines for its potential to improve career prospects, earning potential, and social mobility (Asis et al., 2018; Baltar, 2018; Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), 2020) view education as a treasured legacy passed down through generations, leading to a better quality of life (De Leon, 2014; Tariga & Cutamora, 2016).

While the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act has increased access to college education in the Philippines, students still face financial challenges and rigorous academic

standards (Ortiz et al., 2019). The transition from high school to university life presents numerous academic and non-academic hurdles. The shift to a more demanding academic environment, characterized by increased workload and a greater emphasis on critical thinking, can be overwhelming for students, leading to academic stress and negatively impacting their performance (Kyndt et al., 2014; ;Ruberman, 2014; Tan-De Guia, 2016; Maguddayao, 2018; McCoy et al., 2014).

"Culture shock," characterized by stress, anxiety, and disorientation stemming from unfamiliar cultural norms and practices (Lam, 2017; Dudley, 2022) significantly impacts students transitioning to university life. This study defines culture shock as the multifaceted adjustment challenging period faced by new university students, encompassing academic, social, and cultural difficulties. Freshmen at state universities in the Philippines, particularly high achievers, face heightened pressure to adapt to new academic expectations, social environments, and independent living situations (Tan, 2022; Pirmohammadi, 2016; Retuya et al., 2017). On-campus living can further amplify these challenges.

While existing research on culture shock primarily focuses on international students' language and communication barriers (Presbitero, 2016; Orta et al., 2019; Iorga et al., 2020) there is limited understanding of how domestic Filipino freshmen, especially high achievers, experience and navigate this transition. This study addresses this gap by employing a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of these students. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the research identifies their initial and peak culture shock experiences, challenges faced, and coping strategies employed. The findings aim to inform future research and support the development of interventions to ease the transition from high school to college for Filipino freshmen.

## **METHODS**

To achieve the study's objectives, the study utilized a qualitative design, following a phenomenological approach to gain an in-depth analysis of the challenges and experiences of the target population. Phenomenology examines subjective experiences and describes phenomena as directly lived, experienced, perceived, and constructed by individuals (Howitt & Cramer, 2020)

The study focused on the Batch 2022 at a state university in Laguna, Philippines, a cohort that had to transition from remote learning back to in-person classes after the COVID-19 pandemic. This unique context allowed for an exploration of culture shock's impact on freshmen students, as their first year coincided with a period of significant adjustment and adaptation not only to university life but also to the resumption of face-to-face interactions and routines. The study was conducted in early 2023.

The research aimed to investigate various aspects of culture shock by involving ten participants who met specific criteria: (1) being part of Batch 2022 at the selected state university; (2) graduating senior high school with academic honors (with honors, with high honors, or with highest honors); (3) living independently within or near campus without immediate family support; and (4) perceived to have experienced "culture shock" during their first year at the university.

A combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques was employed to identify potential participants. Initially, purposive sampling was used to identify individuals who met the four criteria mentioned above. Screening surveys were used to verify participant eligibility and assess their comfort level with participating in one-on-one interviews. Snowball sampling was also used to identify additional participants through referrals. This multi-faceted approach

was essential for identifying participants who could provide valuable insights into the challenges and adaptive strategies of freshmen as they acclimate to a new academic environment and increase independence while managing their academic responsibilities.

**Table 1.** Socio-Demographic Profiles of Study Participants

Participant Number	Age	Degree Program	Hometown	Current Residence	Going Home Frequency
1	20	BS Chemical Eng'g	Laguna	Renting On Campus	Weekly
2	20	BS Human Ecology	Cavite	University Dormitory	Monthly
3	20	BS De't Communication	Quezon	Renting Off Campus	Monthly
4	20	BS Economics	Manila	Renting Off Campus	Weekly
5	20	BS Electrical Eng'g	Manila	Renting Off Campus	Weekly
6	20	BS Forestry	Quezon	Renting On Campus	Weekly
7	20	BS Mathematics	Cavite	Renting Off Campus	Every few months
8	21	BA Sociology	Laguna	Renting Off Campus	Monthly
9	19	BS Biology	Laguna	Renting Off Campus	Weekly
10	20	BS Food Science and Technology	Pampanga	University Dormitory	Monthly

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic profiles of the study participants. It is crucial as it provides insight into the varying backgrounds of the participants, which may influence their experiences of culture shock and adaptation to university life.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews that were conducted face-to-face, following a general format and set of predetermined questions to ensure consistency across participants while allowing for flexibility and exploration of individual experiences. The interview guide included open-ended and closed-ended questions to foster a natural conversation flow while adhering to the interview guide. This approach ensured that all relevant areas were covered while still allowing flexibility to explore new ideas that may arise during the interview. Interview questions aimed to understand the participants' perceptions, emotions, and challenges related to their college transition, academically and living independently. For example, participants were asked "Describe your initial culture shock experience" and "What were some of the biggest challenges you faced?". The interviews also explored the coping strategies and support systems the participants used in navigating their adjustment and facing challenges.

Thematic analysis was employed to examine the interview data, prioritizing an inductive coding approach to allow themes and codes to emerge organically from the participants' narratives, including non-verbal cues. This ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the raw data, capturing the nuances of individual experiences while identifying recurring patterns and themes related to freshmen students' experiences of "culture shock." This approach aligns with the phenomenological nature of the study, aiming to understand the lived experiences of the participants. All ethical considerations were addressed, with informed consent obtained from all participants. Anonymity was secured by using "P#" instead of real names throughout the study.

By combining a phenomenological approach, a focus on the unique experiences of Batch 2022, and a rigorous data collection and analysis process, this study aimed to provide a rich and nuanced understanding of culture shock among high-achieving freshmen at a Philippine state university.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

This study explores the initial and peak experiences of culture shock among high-achieving freshmen transitioning to university life, focusing on the challenges, adjustments, and coping mechanisms employed. Central to understanding these experiences is Table 2, which summarizes participants' personal definitions of culture shock. This table reveals both diverse perspectives and shared themes, highlighting feelings of surprise, unfamiliarity with new routines, and the pressure to adapt rapidly to overwhelming information and practices. These findings underscore the significant impact of culture shock on students' academic and emotional well-being during this critical period of transition.

**Table 2.** Participants' Definitions of Culture Shock

Participant Number	Definition of Culture Shock	Direct Quotation
1	Something you haven't experienced before; surprising and unexpected.	<i>"Something that you haven't experienced before. Then... Just, you will just be surprised that it's like that."</i>
2	Not accustomed to something; suddenly needing to adopt it.	<i>"Culture shock is when you're not accustomed to witnessing or experiencing something. Then suddenly you need to adopt it right now, right here, like that."</i>
3	Sudden immersion into the unknown; unsettling expansion of what was a patterned life.	<i>"It's like I was suddenly immersed in cold water, and I wasn't prepared. That's how it feels. Because I feel... like I came from a consistent and like patterned life. Then all of a sudden things will become chaotic, I will be startled because my world is expanding. It's like it suddenly grew, without me expecting it to be this vast. And... That's how I feel about it. And it's not necessarily a bad experience. More like... Unsettling."</i>
4	Being unaccustomed to new habits or practices in a new environment.	<i>"You will be culture-shocked by an experience when it is something that you are not accustomed to. For instance... I can't fully explain it. Just that, it's like you're not used to the things that people nowadays who are around you are doing. That usually, that's what happens. Once, you're new to an environment."</i>
5	Abrupt change without time to adjust; an overwhelming amount of information.	<i>"Culture shock is something that you are used to, then suddenly, in a snap of a finger, it will change without proper time to adjust because it's like everything, like an overwhelming amount of stuff, is happening. But at the same time, you have no choice, if it's necessary, you need to go with that no matter how fast."</i>
6	Feeling overwhelmed and super unfamiliar despite support; coping through a 'go-go' attitude	<i>"That's the word, really overwhelmed. Because there's so much... It's like there is a lot happening around me that... Why is it like this, I'm not usually like this in this aspect and it's intense... even though, of course, there is family support and everything. It's super unfamiliar, really. It's like being frozen. Like you have no choice but to keep going on and on even if that maybe became my coping mechanism, that 'go-go' attitude, that's really it."</i>
7	A new chapter; being surprised and feeling unaccustomed to new experiences.	<i>"New Chapter. Just a new chapter so that, you know, when something new happens, you really will be surprised, like you will feel unaccustomed. New experiences as well."</i>
8	Transition from one's own culture to a new one; overwhelming change in values and routines.	<i>"So for me, culture shock is when you come from the culture you grew up with and then you go to a new one, that feeling that it can really be overwhelming because why is there suddenly a change in such values, in routines."</i>

Participant Number	Definition of Culture Shock	Direct Quotation
9	Adjustment struggles outside of one's comfort zone.	<i>"Culture shock... It's a state where... where you're struggling to adjust because it's not... it's not... it's without... what, it's not within the range of your comfort."</i>
10	Overwhelming and overstimulation from new information; adapting to survive in a new setting.	<i>"I feel that when it's culture shock, it's a very overwhelming feeling. And then it's like... You're overstimulated because you're seeing so much, it's like a lot of new information about random things is being introduced. Then it's like this is how they are, this is what's done here so I should do the same. This is what I need to do to survive here. It's like that's the... and you will only feel it when, for instance, you're already experiencing the effect of the action."</i>

The table provides a detailed view of how high-achieving students interpret and experience culture shock during their transition to university. Each definition offers unique insights into the initial challenges that can shape their academic and social adaptation. These definitions, while varied, collectively illustrate the scope of culture shock, reinforcing the need to understand and address it within the context of higher education to support students' success. The individual responses thus serve as a qualitative foundation for addressing the research questions concerning the nature and impact of culture shock on high-achieving freshmen.

### Unpacking the Culture Shock Experience

**Table 3.** Participant's Initial and Peak Culture Shock Experiences

Participant Number	Initial Culture Shock Experience	Peak Culture Shock Experience
1	Felt very confused and doubted their ability in the first class	Suffered from anxiety due to getting low grades despite hard work
2	Surprised by the relaxed classroom style and lack of Filipino honorifics Shocked by the alcohol consumption culture or " <i>Inom Culture</i> "	Found living independently in the dorm to be a radical change
3	Surprised by the wide range of students' economic and language backgrounds	Felt extreme stress and hopelessness during a challenging economics exam
4	Shocked by the common alcohol consumption or " <i>Inom Culture</i> ," differed from family values	Felt a stark difference between high school and college life
5	Overwhelmed by the diversity and variety of other students' backgrounds	Faced difficulty adjusting from high grades in high school to lower grades in the competitive university
6	Intimidated by peers' intelligence and felt self-doubt	Exhausted by a demanding lab course, impacting everyday life and causing mental fatigue
7	Disoriented by the new social life and academic setup and processes	Experienced anxiety and shock after a difficult test resulted in a failing grade
8	Unfamiliar with late-night social life and campus drinking or the " <i>Inom Culture</i> "	Impacted by the depth of class discussions and surprised by an on-campus protest
9	Intimidated by the varying backgrounds of peers and worried about performance	Challenged by professors' implicit expectations, requiring a change in learning approach
10	Overwhelmed by the fast pace on the first day of the lab class	Struggled with a quick increase in workload and exams early in the academic year



## Navigating Freshman Year Challenges

Transitioning to college has its unique set of challenges, particularly for freshmen navigating a new academic and social landscape. These challenges can be amplified as students adjust to the cultural differences between high school and university life, often leading to feelings of culture shock. Table 4 provides a brief overview of these challenges and their relationship to culture shock.

**Table 4.** The Relationship Between Freshman Challenges and Culture Shock

Challenge	Definition	Relation to Culture Shock
Navigating New Academic Environment and Rigor	This challenge refers to adjusting to complex, demanding university work with faster pacing and a higher cognitive load.	Acclimation to intense academic demands necessitates rapid adaptation, causing disorientation as part of culture shock.
Mastery of Time Management and Navigating Lifestyle Adjustments	This challenge refers to the difficulties of organizing routines and managing time amid new self-sustenance and independent living situations like dorm life.	The need for effective time management and lifestyle adaptation underscores the cultural transition, amplifying culture shock.
Financial Management and Scholarship Maintenance	This challenge refers to budgeting for living expenses and maintaining scholarships in the absence of tuition fees	Financial adaptation is a practical component of culture shock, as budgeting and scholarship pressures add stress
Social and Cultural Adaptation	This challenge refers to stress from acclimating to the university's social/cultural norms and forming new relationships	Navigating new social and cultural environments inherent to university life contributes to culture shock.
Expectations and Pressure	This challenge refers to high achievers balancing personal goals with external pressures.	High achievers feel culture shock from tensions between personal aspirations and external expectations.
Challenges in Psychological and Emotional Well-being	This challenge refers to the preservation of mental and emotional health amidst academic rigors and resulting stressors.	Culture shock is linked to the psychological adjustment challenges posed by academic and lifestyle stressors.

Self-directed learning emerges as another critical theme essential for navigating these challenges. Participants discuss the need for proactive engagement with course materials and the adjustment of study habits to meet the rigorous demands of college. P4 emphasizes the importance of self-study, stating, *"Now it seems like just relying on stock knowledge won't work anymore. Often, when you're in class, you really don't understand anything yet. You really need to do self-study, to work... If you don't get it then you don't."* This highlights the transformative nature and challenges of learning autonomy.

Moreover, unmet expectations are a recurring theme among participants, revealing discrepancies between anticipated and actual academic experiences. P5 shares their disillusionment, stating, *"I expected that in my freshman year... I would ace it and have highly average grades. Because they said that what we studied in senior high school, we'll study again in college, at a different difficulty... I expected that the flow of college life would be smooth. No delays, or that I would graduate on time. Wow. Now my reality is... I've failed so many."* Such reflections capture the profound adjustments required when transitioning from high school to university.

Lastly, college preparedness emerges as a significant challenge. Participants recount their struggles stemming from inadequate preparation during high school, exacerbated by the abrupt shift from online to in-person classes post-pandemic. Alkaabi and Altae (2024) noted how exams conducted online could also lead to anxiety and distress among students

P7 describes feeling unprepared for the rigorous academic demands and unfamiliarity with university-level expectations, stating, *"I struggled right away. I struggled because, it's like, I was not used to it, it was still very unfamiliar to me because that's it, coming from only online classes, and then, suddenly boom there was a surge in workload..."* This highlights the critical need for tailored support and transitional assistance for incoming students.

### Mastery of Time Management and Navigating Lifestyle Adjustments

Integrating academic pressures with self-sufficiency requirements challenges students to maintain a healthy lifestyle, including adequate sleep and nutrition. The impacts of university demands on daily routines, such as disrupted sleep and eating patterns, are highlighted. P7 illustrates the impacts of the university demands on their daily routines: *"In college, sometimes there's no sleep, sometimes there's no eating. For example, when there's a lot to do, many things to submit, especially during the first sem... I no longer eat breakfast ever since I started college."* Such disruptions underscore the shift from previous lifestyles to the realities of university life, highlighting the challenge of fostering sustainable habits amidst academic demands.

### Managing Finances and Maintaining Scholarship

Participants' accounts showcase the dual financial and academic pressures of maintaining a scholarship, such as those under the Philippines' Department of Science and Technology (DOST). The stakes for academic performance are high in these circumstances. P7 expressed this stress by stating: *"What became a bigger concern for me is my DOST scholarship - the only failing mark allowed should be one instance throughout the study. That's why every semester, I get anxious whenever there's a difficult subject."*

P7 and P10 highlight the compounded concerns of a student from a single-parent household maintaining a scholarship with P10 sharing: *"It (school) needs to be DOST accredited, and then my family won't have to spend any money. Because financially, we are not stable...And the only viable option for me was a State University... I said that I must not get a failing grade. I need to comply with the requirements of the scholarship... The pressure on me is just not to fail so I can keep the scholarship..."*

The personal accounts of university students reveal the ongoing financial pressures they experience, especially when it comes to budgeting. While scholarships provide some relief, they also come with their own challenges. Students must carefully manage their finances while maintaining their academic performance to retain their scholarships. De Gayardon (2019) argues that "free higher education" should not only focus on access to education but also consider the financial sustainability of students throughout their academic journey. This includes addressing hidden expenses that accumulate over time.

### Expectations and Pressure

The interplay between external pressures such as societal standards, familial expectations, and peer comparison, and the internal pressures that students place upon themselves can create a complex environment for university students. P9 shared *"...If you're a university student, you should be smart. I kind of also want to prove to myself that, I am a recon [reconsidered] student... So I need to exert more effort to prove that I can match those who are not recon students."* It also covers the pervasive issue of self-generated pressure by emphasizing how

students may absorb external expectations that intensify their pursuit of achievement and impact their academic and personal identities. This offers insights into how these multifaceted pressures influence freshmen university students, potentially shaping their decision-making behaviors and self-assessment.

Freshmen struggle with balancing personal and external expectations. Tan (2022) reveals that Filipino students face strains from balancing their own expectations and those imposed by others, including parents and the competitive environment. Concerns about aging parents add urgency to academic progress, reflecting the value of *"utang na loob,"* a cultural norm of debt of gratitude that motivates academic excellence (Conde & Flores, 2020). P6 articulates this pressure, stating, *"My family... expects that I do my best because that's their only consolation for supporting my studies."* This statement highlights the weight of familial expectations and the perceived obligation to succeed as a form of reciprocity for their sacrifices.

Students feel pressured to maintain their high school success and compare themselves with peers, leading to stress and inadequacy. Lau et al. (2019) discuss the competitive environment and its impact on students' sense of adequacy. These pressures cause culture shock as students reconcile personal identity with external expectations during the transition to university life.

### Challenges in Psychological and Emotional Well-being

High-achieving students face significant psychological and emotional distress due to university demands and self-directed learning.

The participants' stories reveal an ongoing struggle with feelings of insecurity as they try to reconcile their self-image with their present capabilities and situations, especially in areas where they previously excelled. P10 highlights this struggle: *"I developed a severe case of imposter syndrome. I felt like, 'You're not really that good because in high school you were just with your friends because it's like this.' It's like high school was easy. So in college, when you're on your own, you can't handle it, something like that."*

The need for high-quality work and the pressure to meet both internal and external expectations contribute to a persistent sense of inadequacy. Moreover, the drive to maintain an image of unwavering competence can lead to unhealthy levels of isolation, negatively impacting students' social and physical well-being.

Emotional distress such as loneliness, homesickness, or even thoughts of self-harm further compounds the strain from academic pressures. Students are also faced with dilemmas about sacrificing their own health in pursuit of academic excellence. P5 describes this experience: *"Definitely, there's stress and anxiety... I'm in limbo not knowing how I can solve this... 'Can I really handle this? It's either pass or drop.' But then, I have no choice."* The competitive and demanding environment adds to the psychological and emotional challenges faced by new university students.

### Support and Coping: Navigating First-Year Cultural Adjustment

Support networks are crucial for students adapting to university life. This study examines how freshmen leverage these networks and personal strategies to navigate cultural and academic challenges. Table 5 provides a concise overview of these coping strategies and support systems.



**Table 5.** Coping Strategies and Support Systems

Coping Strategies/ Support System	Initial Culture Shock Experience
Support Networks	This refers to the important relationships and resources that students turn to for emotional, informational, and practical support. These include family, friends, institutional services, and peers who help students overcome the challenges of adjusting to university life.
A. Family Support	This refers to the emotional and practical assistance provided by family members, often taking the form of regular communication, encouragement, and reassurance. Families also help ease the transition by emphasizing perseverance and effort over perfect grades.
B. Friends and Peers	This refers to the companionship and support from fellow students who may be undergoing similar experiences. This includes roommates, classmates, and other peers who provide a sense of belonging and mutual assistance or support.
C. Scholarships	This refers to the financial aid awarded to students to help cover the costs of their education. This support reduces financial stress, allowing students to concentrate more on their studies and personal adjustment.
Self-Help	This refers to the individual coping strategies employed by students to manage stress and adapt to the academic environment. This may encompass mindfulness practices, self-care routines, and other personal wellness activities.
A. Leveraging on Experiences	This refers to using past experiences, whether successes or failures, as a reference point to develop coping strategies for present challenges. This can help students anticipate and navigate difficulties in the academic setting.
B. Engagement in Leisure Activities or Hobbies	This refers to participation in activities outside of academic commitments that provide relaxation and enjoyment. This can balance the academic workload and contribute to overall well-being.
C. Proactive Academic Strategizing	This refers to students actively taking steps to address academic challenges, including seeking educational assistance, time management, joining study groups, and utilizing institutional resources to enhance their academic performance.

### Support Networks

Students express gratitude for the diverse nature of support, ranging from emotional to financial, which collectively facilitates smoother adjustments to university life. On the social spectrum, friends and peers form an indispensable safety net, offering clarity and comfort through shared experiences in facing new academic and personal challenges. P3 describes this support during difficult times, sharing *"Maybe it's also my gratitude that I found the right group of people to mingle with, both in my organization and in my college. And even my high school friends who also study here. They are the ones who really didn't give up on me."* While forming these supportive bonds and participating in organizations can be transformative and enhance personal development, it's also acknowledged that peer support, despite its potency, may not align with every individual's preferences or result in universally positive outcomes. This underscores the need to appreciate the diversity of experiences in the socio-academic landscape of university life.

Scholarships also serve as additional support by alleviating financial burdens, giving students the freedom to focus on their studies while providing stability and enabling access to higher education. Collectively, the narratives and literature demonstrate that purposive action

of actively seeking out opportunities to improve interpersonal skills and relationships by communicating with close family and friends for support and motivation, reaching out to others experiencing similar challenges can reduce anxiety, and learning from locals and fellow peers while gaining support system (Anjalin et al., 2017; Austria-Cruz, 2019). These interconnected support systems play an indispensable role in students' academic and personal development, helping them navigate the multifaceted challenges of university life.

### Self-Help

Self-help is more than just a simple technique; it encompasses resilience and strategic planning. High-achieving students utilize self-help to not only navigate university life but also thrive in it. This approach involves learning from past experiences, engaging in leisure activities, proactive academic planning, and generally, self-regulation, as a means of finding relief from academic demands and maintaining overall well-being. By leveraging effective study techniques alongside hobbies and downtime, students construct a strong framework for coping with the challenges they encounter during their academic journey. P3 describes the combination of these techniques by sharing: *"So maybe, the next time I experience culture shock, it will just be like an ant bite. It will be easier because I've already gone through it twice, what's that... Time has already toughened me up."* It's an intricate balance between persistence in academics and understanding the importance of strategic rest for mental rejuvenation away from academic pursuits (Lombard, 2014).

In this self-directed approach, students carefully assess their commitments, balancing study sessions and organizational memberships with their well-being while striving for scholarly success. Their thoughtful approach demonstrates a commitment to maintaining a balanced academic life as they prioritize between academic responsibilities, personal growth, and community interactions by finding a middle ground. P6 highlights this strategy by consciously deciding to forgo extracurricular activities during her freshman year to prioritize academic adaptation: *"Organization... I just joined now in my second year because... They say it's not recommended for Freshmen to take on an org because we need to adjust first before we take on other workloads aside from our academics."*

The narratives show varying levels of involvement: some benefit significantly from participating in organizations, while others focus on academics and self-care. Each individual conscientiously considers their own limits and preferences because they understand how these decisions impact their well-being and academic performance. The students' approaches to organizational participation are highly personalized—some thrive in community life's vibrancy while others prefer more measured involvement reflecting tailored strategies that balance sociability with the pursuit of academic excellence and personal fulfillment. In essence, these students demonstrate intentional action, employing self-management through thought-out measures to navigate cultural adjustments and the demands of college life (Rilveria, 2018; Syawaludin et al., 2020).

### Discussion

Navigating the new academic environment and rigor presents a multifaceted challenge for high-achieving students. Participants describe the increase in academic workload encountered during their first year at college, highlighting an acceleration in lesson pacing and a substantial advancement in the complexity and depth of work expected. This experience underscores the theme of academic intensity and pressure.

The financial complexities of higher education extend beyond the classroom, with students facing an array of costs that can create financial challenges, even when tuition fees are waived.

Based on the narratives of participants students experience struggles as they manage the demands of budgeting for accommodation, food, utilities, and academic resources. These personal accounts paint a vivid picture of the juggling act that students perform, balancing their financial realities with their academic responsibilities in the pursuit of their educational goals.

Effective time management and adapting to new lifestyles are crucial for students transitioning into the university environment, characterized by irregular and demanding schedules, the need to balance academic pursuits with personal well-being, and disruptions to established routines. Narratives reveal the challenge of irregular schedules hindering sustained focus and creating a misleading sense of ample time, overshadowed by rigorous academic demands.

The quality of task management is as critical as its quantity, with stringent expectations compelling students to prioritize effectively—any misstep in this delicate balance can trigger a cycle of overwhelming pressure. The transition to university life often grants newfound autonomy but presents the challenge of managing this independence effectively. The results coincide with other research that highlights that freshmen struggle with time management due to increased academic loads and the flexibility to create personal schedules, intensifying stress and impacting overall well-being (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2014). This sentiment is echoed by participants, articulating struggles in balancing academic responsibilities with self-care practices.

Navigating the social and cultural complexities of university life is challenging for high-achieving students. They struggle with belonging, building relationships, and maintaining connections outside the university. Waterman et al. (2017) note that students may alter behaviors to conform to new norms, increasing stress and self-doubt. This aligns with feelings of heightened competition and fears of social isolation. External factors, such as the global pandemic, exacerbate these feelings, making social interactions daunting.

The value of various support networks—family, friends, peers, and scholarships—cannot be overstated when navigating the transition to university life. Family support is crucial, reducing academic pressure and emphasizing perseverance while providing a nurturing atmosphere during times of adaptation (Yan, 2020). In addition, modern communication technologies play a pivotal role in bridging physical distances, thus assisting in reducing the negative impact of culture shock (Kenney et al., 2015; Rakipi, 2015; Pacheco, 2020).

## **CONCLUSION**

The investigation into the experiences of high-achieving freshmen at a state university in the Philippines reveals the multifaceted and complex nature of culture shock. Faced with increased academic demands, dynamic social environments, and the delicate balance of autonomy and responsibility, these students navigate a culture marked by the university's non-block system and diverse population. Culture shock is intensified by the need to align personal goals with external expectations. Strong support systems, such as family, friends, and institutional aid like university organizations, are invaluable in mitigating these difficulties. Additionally, material resources, self-help strategies, and proactive academic planning emerge as key coping mechanisms. Recognizing the significance of these findings can assist educational institutions and stakeholders in crafting policies and support structures that aid the cultural and academic adjustment of incoming college students. These measures should not only alleviate the initial cultural and academic shock but also promote an inclusive and supportive academic environment for all students.

This study underscores the need for multifaceted support systems to ease freshmen's transition into university life and mitigate culture shock. Empowering students with resources and training to enhance self-regulation and resilience is crucial. Beyond freshman orientation, institutions should offer ongoing programs in time management, stress management, and adaptive coping strategies, fostering independence and self-efficacy. Incorporating student input into the General Instruction (GI) course can also improve its relevance and impact. Peer support networks are essential. Student-to-student mentorship programs can cultivate a sense of community and belonging. Digital platforms, like social media help desks, can enhance accessibility and support. Options for anonymous engagement should be available to address privacy concerns.

Institutional support should include robust orientation programs, specialized staff training to increase awareness and empathy, and transitional academic programs. Accessible bridge or summer programs can ease the academic transition. Informing professors about culture shock can encourage understanding and flexibility within the academic setting. Encouraging students to use consultation hours to discuss concerns openly can also be beneficial. Family support is vital. Universities should offer orientation sessions and workshops for parents or guardians to highlight potential challenges and provide guidance on effective support strategies. All programs should prioritize visibility, accessibility, sustainability, and student-friendliness to ensure optimal utilization and impact. Policymakers can develop supportive policies to ease student transitions. Recognizing the financial burdens of culture shock, policies should prioritize equitable access to financial aid and flexible support systems, such as minimizing penalties for scholarship revocation due to academic struggles.

This study offers valuable insights into the complexities of student acculturation into the university environment, bringing about implications for both policy and educational practice. Policymakers can leverage these findings to develop supportive policies that ease student transitions. Recognizing the financial burdens associated with culture shock, policies should prioritize equitable access to financial aid for students from all backgrounds. Additionally, flexible support systems, such as minimizing penalties for scholarship revocation due to academic struggles, are crucial to accommodate the diverse factors influencing student experiences. Beyond policy implications, this study contributes significantly to the theoretical understanding of culture shock. It provides empirical support for the interconnectedness of affective, behavioral, and cognitive responses in both experiencing and adapting to culture shock. Furthermore, it highlights the dynamic nature of acculturation, offering practical insights into how students navigate the balance between adapting to university culture and preserving their own identities.

Future research should expand these findings. Quantitative methods could assess the generalizability of these results to a larger, more diverse student population. Longitudinal studies could track the evolution of culture shock and adaptation strategies beyond the freshman year. Comparing experiences across different university settings could reveal how institutional factors influence student experiences. Exploring culture shock in other academic transitions, such as graduate school, Filipino students studying abroad, and international students in the Philippines, would offer a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon and inform more effective support systems.

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