



## A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE JOURNEY OF COLLEGE DROPOUTS

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### ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of college dropouts and examined how they navigated their post-higher education journeys. Utilizing Colaizzi's method of data analysis, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with seven participants until data saturation was reached. The study aimed to uncover the underlying factors that influenced the decision to discontinue studies while capturing the emotions, challenges, and transformations that followed. Findings revealed that attrition did not result from a single event but from a cascading interaction of financial constraints, family caregiving responsibilities, health-related concerns, academic pressures, and institutional limitations. While financial difficulties and family responsibilities emerged as dominant themes, health issues and social influences also contributed significantly to withdrawal decisions. Despite initial feelings of regret, the participants expressed resilience, maturity, and acceptance, recognizing that their experiences fostered growth, responsibility, and a renewed sense of purpose. Consequently, the researchers concluded that dropping out should not be viewed solely as an academic failure but as a complex human experience marked by adaptation and learning beyond the classroom. Based on these results, the study recommends strengthening student support systems, enhancing counseling and financial assistance programs, and fostering inclusive educational environments that acknowledge diverse student realities.

**Keywords:** *college dropouts, phenomenology, lived experiences, financial constraints, resilience, Colaizzi's method.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape characterized by the increasing dominance of the knowledge economy, higher education is posited as a fundamental pillar for individual mobility and societal progress (Chau et al., 2023). However, the persistence of college attrition presents a significant global dilemma as higher learning institutions struggle to retain students through graduation. The scale of this issue is substantial; approximately 40% of college students annually discontinue their studies, with the United States alone recording an estimated 43.3 million dropouts—a figure representing a 3.6% year-over-year increase (Flores, 2023). This trend is exacerbated by growing apprehension among students regarding the value of their degrees and turbulence in labor markets, which deepens concerns regarding post-graduation career outcomes (Greenfield, 2023). The ramifications of these high attrition rates extend beyond individual setbacks, negatively impacting national workforces, economic stability, and the broader social fabric (Vardishvili, 2020).

Narrowing the focus to the local context, the economic stability of the region and the well-being of the community are intrinsically linked to the retention and success of students in higher education (Luciano et al., 2022). Yet, despite the strategic implementation of the Free Tuition Law intended to democratize access, student attrition remains a critical challenge in the Philippines. Magsambol (2025) reported that four out of ten Filipino college students fail to complete their degrees, a trend highlighted by Senator Sherwin Gatchalian, who observed a surge in attrition rates from 15.90% in 2020–2021 to an alarming 40.98% by 2022–2023. To contextualize this exodus, data from the Philippine Statistics Authority's Annual Poverty Indicators Survey (APIS) for school year 2022–2023 show a shift in attrition drivers, with employment (19.7%), lack of personal interest (12.6%), and marriage (10.7%) surpassing financial constraints (9.9%) as the leading reasons individuals aged five to 24 are not currently enrolled. (Ceballos, 2023).

While the existing body of literature on college attrition is extensive, the researchers of this study observed that it is heavily saturated with quantitative inquiries focused on the determinants and predictors of dropping out (Nurmalitasari et al., 2023). These studies, which predominantly utilize surveys and standardized persistence questionnaires (Gijón et al., 2023), tend to frame the act of dropping out as a statistical endpoint or an academic failure. Consequently, a significant research gap exists regarding the "post-dropout" reality. There is a scarcity of phenomenological research viewing attrition not as a conclusion but as a transitional phenomenon. Specifically, within the Philippine context—where dropout rates rise despite tuition subsidies—there is a lack of understanding regarding the human dimension of this statistic: how individuals reconstruct their identities, navigate the labor market without a degree, and employ specific coping mechanisms for economic survival. The researchers intend to address this void by shifting the analytical lens from the "causes of attrition" to "consequences and continuity."

To bridge this gap, the researchers utilized a phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences and post-college trajectories of individuals who discontinued their higher education. Anchored in the framework of the United Nations Sustainable De-

velopment Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, this study investigates how educational disruption shapes access to employment, economic participation, and personal resilience. By foregrounding the voices of college dropouts, the researchers seek to challenge prevailing stigmas, illuminate alternative life pathways, and inform the development of inclusive academic support systems, career guidance programs, and employability-focused interventions that promote workforce inclusion and sustainable economic growth.

## Research Questions

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of college dropouts, focusing particularly on their post-attrition trajectories. Anchored in Husserlian phenomenology and utilizing Colaizzi's method for data interpretation, the research aimed to uncover and analyze the often-overlooked narratives of individuals who encountered obstacles in higher education and discontinued their studies before degree completion.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What were the underlying factors and lived experiences that influenced the participants' decision to discontinue their higher education?
2. How did the participants navigate their transition and lived experiences following their departure from the academic institution?

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design grounded in Husserlian phenomenology to examine the lived experiences of college dropouts, utilizing Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step phenomenological thematic analysis to ensure analytic rigor. The research was conducted in Dumaguete City, 2nd congressional district of Negros Oriental, Philippines. Participants consisted of seven former college students who met predetermined inclusion criteria related to duration of dropout and non-reenrollment. Respondents were selected through purposive and snowball sampling until data saturation was achieved. Data were gathered through face-to-face, semi-structured in-depth interviews guided by a researcher-developed interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions validated through expert review and pilot-tested prior to implementation. Interviews were conducted in participants' homes following informed consent, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, anonymized, and translated with expert verification. Analysis involved extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, and constructing a comprehensive description of the phenomenon. Credibility was ensured through member checking and transcript verification. Ethical safeguards included confidentiality, secure data storage, and deletion of recordings after analysis. The study was limited to permanent college dropouts within the specified locale and relied on self-reported experiences, making findings context-specific and not intended for statistical generalization.

## RESULTS

This section presents all the relevant data gathered by the researchers through an interview. It must be noted that open-ended questions were used by the researchers to collect information from the seven participants of the study. The transcripts of the participants served as the basis for data analysis performed by the researcher using Colaizzi's phenomenological method.

### Emergent Theme 1: Burdens of the Broken Purse

Financial difficulty emerged as the most pervasive factor influencing the participants' decision to discontinue higher education. The participants described tuition fees, miscellaneous charges, laboratory expenses, and project costs as overwhelming burdens, particularly for those enrolled in private institutions. These financial demands were often compounded by unstable household incomes, single-parent family structures, and a lack of external financial support. For many, working while studying transitioned from a choice to a necessity; however, this dual burden frequently resulted in physical exhaustion, severe time constraints, and declining academic performance.

*"The fees at my school are actually quite high. On top of the tuition, there are laboratory fees and other charges. So, if you were to just fool around, it would really be painful—it's a huge waste of money" (P1)*

*"I really tried my best to push through and finish. However, nursing is such an expensive course, and my mom just couldn't afford the tuition anymore. Even though it was painful—and the last thing I wanted to do—I had to stop schooling" (P6)*

### Emergent Theme 2: Chains of Kinship and Duty

Family responsibilities significantly shaped the educational trajectories of the participants. The researchers observed that many participants prioritized caregiving roles, household management, and financial contributions over their own academic goals. Eldest children, in particular, reported assuming breadwinner roles when parents became ill, unemployed, or financially unstable. Furthermore, parental expectations regarding specific degree programs often contributed to emotional pressure, anxiety, and eventual disengagement from their studies.

*"My sibling and I took charge of caring for her while I continued my studies. It was quite difficult; there were times I couldn't study or even finish my projects because my focus was entirely on my mother. She would call out in the middle of the night because her knee was in pain—a wound caused by just an ant bite that had started to fester. Since she was diabetic, the wound wouldn't heal easily; the injured part of her body was slowly deteriorating." (P5)*

*"Since I am the eldest in the family, I just decided to go ahead and explore the workforce. I told myself that school isn't going anywhere—the opportunity to study will still be there waiting for me." (P2)*

### **Emergent Theme 3: The Fragile Self in the Storm.**

Participants reported that physical and psychological health challenges hindered their ability to persist in college. Chronic illness, disability, stress, emotional exhaustion, and mental distress were common experiences, often exacerbated by financial strain and academic pressure. These conditions led to frequent absences, reduced concentration, and diminished motivation.

*"I really wanted to become a police officer, but being a PWD made that difficult; I was born with a dislocated foot, so that career path wasn't really an option for me. I was inspired because my uncles are in the police and military but given my condition—where I struggle even to walk—I knew I couldn't handle combat. Still, I have to admit that being part of the uniformed personnel has always been my dream. Even if not the police, I would have loved to join the BFP or Coast Guard, especially since almost all my cousins are in the PNP." (P1)*

*"During that time, I felt really lost—like there was no hope for me. When you think about it, job hunting comes with so many requirements, the number one being a college degree. Without one, your only real option is the BPO industry. I felt depressed—well, not exactly clinically depressed, but really down. My mindset was plagued by thoughts that I couldn't help my family and maybe had no future; I had no job, I hadn't finished school, and at my age, I hadn't really achieved anything yet." (P4)*

### **Emergent Theme 4: Social Winds and Their Shadows.**

Peer influence played a significant role in shaping participants' academic engagement. While some peers offered emotional support, others contributed to disengagement through excessive socialization, substance use, and nightlife. Several participants reported strained or dissolved friendships following their withdrawal from school. One participant disclosed an experience of sexual exploitation during a period of vulnerability, which had lasting emotional and social consequences.

*"Most of the people I hung out with were what we call 'pala-igit'—our slang for heavy drinkers. They were hardcore; they would drink just about anything. I didn't drink at first because I wasn't used to it, and my mom would get mad if I did back in high school, so this lifestyle was really new to me. Eventually, it reached a point where if my friends ran out of money, I was the one footing the bill. My allowance was constantly getting wiped out." (P1)*

*"I really couldn't avoid the nightlife. I'd go drinking, get a little buzzed, and then head to the clubs—there are so many near Hayahay. I was there most of the time, simply because I got carried away by my friends." (P3)*

### **Emergent Theme 5: The Labyrinth of Learning.**

Academic challenges were prominent in participants' narratives. Difficulties included heavy coursework, demanding academic programs, and challenges in adapting to the independence required in tertiary education. These struggles were intensified by work and family obligations. Institutional barriers such as curriculum changes, non-crediting of subjects, and administrative inconsistencies further disrupted participants' academic continuity.

*"Unfortunately, during my second year back in school, balancing everything became overwhelming. The main issue was the heavy workload in Architecture; the time I needed for my projects was consumed by my job—that's just the reality of being a working student. There were times I couldn't sleep at all, or I'd go days with barely any rest just to get everything done. It was such a difficult period that I eventually decided I couldn't handle it anymore. I realized that if I forced myself to continue, my health would suffer." (P4)*

*"When they refused to credit my subjects and told me I'd have to go back to being a first-year student, I felt—well, I was really discouraged. I was actually ready to go back and get serious this time, especially since I'm not getting any younger. I really wanted to finish my studies and finally get that degree. But then came this new challenge: being told I had to start all over again as a freshman." (P7)*

### **Emergent Theme 6: Crossroads of Changing Priorities.**

Participants described shifts in priorities resulting from employment, entrepreneurship, and parenthood. For some, stable income and practical experience reduced the urgency of completing a degree. Others redirected their focus toward family responsibilities or business ventures, perceiving these paths as more immediately sustainable.

*"Regarding your earlier question, sir, about why I didn't continue with school, it really came down to the realization that I could earn money even without a degree. At that time, school wasn't on my mind because I was already earning five figures—I won't disclose the exact amount, but I was making five figures every 15 days. It was very doable. I even researched Philippine statistics on the middle class and compared it. It turns out my income matched that of a middle-class earner who had a diploma. So, I figured my schooling was enough. I decided to simply rely on my practical experience and the self-taught knowledge I've gained in the industry I'm currently in." (P2)*

*"After I gave birth, the idea of continuing my studies completely vanished from my mind. My priorities shifted; I had a child to look after now" (P3)*

### **Emergent Theme 7: The Echoes of Unfinished Dreams.**

Despite discontinuing their studies, participants expressed lingering aspirations, regret, and reflection regarding their unfulfilled educational goals. Some conveyed hope of returning to school in the future, while others expressed acceptance and personal growth derived from their experiences beyond formal education.

*"Yes, I definitely still plan to return, sir. I really want to earn my degree." (P7)*

*"As for school, I've decided to put it behind me. That said, I am grateful for the 'on point' mindset I developed during my time in Aviation. It taught me how to make sound decisions and realize that, in the end, you're the only one who truly understands your own path. I adopted a mindset of taking on more: if I didn't know something, I'd dive right in. Once I learned it, I knew it would be useful eventually. So, I don't regret leaving school. The most valuable things I've gained are the lessons not found in textbooks. School gave me the basics—like attitude and decision-making—but I've learned much more about how to actually handle life, the kind of wisdom that school just can't teach." (P2)*

## **DISCUSSION**

This section presents an in-depth analysis of the findings based on the lived experiences of college dropouts. By examining the participants' narratives, significant themes have emerged that highlight their overall experiences in an academic environment. These themes are further supported and contextualized with relevant literature. The discussion is structured around the specific research questions.

### **Emergent Theme 1: Burdens of the Broken Purse**

Participants' accounts consistently indicated that financial hardship was central to their experiences of college discontinuation. Rising educational costs and limited financial resources constrained their ability to sustain enrollment, reflecting broader patterns of economic strain in higher education (Dickler, 2024). Financial difficulties were frequently accompanied by increased family responsibilities, particularly among participants from low-income households, where expectations to contribute financially influenced educational trajectories (Tsolou & Babalis, 2020; Staff, 2024). Many participants described simultaneous engagement in employment and academic work, reporting difficulties in managing time and fulfilling competing roles. Consistent with prior findings, increased working hours were associated with heightened stress and reduced academic participation (Bhattacharya et al., 2022). These conditions coincided with academic disengagement, as participants reported missed classes, declining performance, and eventual withdrawal when work and financial demands intensified (Antonio et al., 2024). Collectively, the theme reflects how economic constraints structured participants' educational experiences and shaped the circumstances surrounding their departure from college.

## **Emergent Theme 2: Chains of Kinship and Duty**

Participants' narratives indicated that family obligations and caregiving responsibilities were central to their educational trajectories, particularly among those who assumed breadwinning or supportive roles within the household. Prior studies document higher dropout risks among students who are older, working, from larger families, or engaged in caregiving duties, with these responsibilities disproportionately affecting female students and those from economically constrained backgrounds (Bayrakçeken et al., 2025). In the Philippine context, research identifies culturally embedded roles such as the *tagapagtaguyod na anak* or *tagasalo*, wherein students assume financial and emotional responsibility for family welfare, often at the expense of academic persistence (Quindoza et al., 2025). Despite the implementation of free higher education policies, indirect educational costs and rising living expenses continued to necessitate student employment, intensifying role strain and fatigue (Antonio et al., 2024). These demands were accompanied by emotional burdens rooted in cultural values of *utang na loob* and reciprocity, with students reporting guilt, anxiety, and moral pressure associated with meeting family expectations (Abogadie et al., 2025). While participants described adaptive strategies and resilience, family duty consistently structured their decisions to pause or discontinue formal education, reframing dropout as a collective family outcome rather than an individual academic event (Shen, 2025).

## **Emergent Theme 3: The Fragile Self in the Storm.**

Participants' accounts reflected heightened vulnerability in physical, emotional, and psychological well-being amid sustained academic and life pressures. Prior studies document that anxiety, depression, stress, and interpersonal difficulties are prevalent among college students and are associated with pressures related to academic performance, employment demands, self-esteem, and future uncertainty (Liang & Feng, 2024). Quantitative findings indicate that stress, anxiety, and depression are significantly and negatively associated with academic performance across year levels, with mental health difficulties persisting throughout the college trajectory (Zhang et al., 2024). Evidence further shows that academic performance contributes to quality of life indirectly, operating through students' physical self-esteem rather than as an independent protective factor (Zayed et al., 2024). Related literature also identifies diminished career clarity—particularly when disrupted by health limitations—as a factor associated with reduced intrinsic motivation and resilience among students (Esto et al., 2025). Reports on student burnout similarly note the presence of cumulative fatigue and emotional exhaustion, shaped by academic strain and external stressors, within broader contexts of declining student mental health (Chong et al., 2025). Collectively, these findings situate participants' experiences within a wider pattern of psychological fragility under compounded academic, personal, and socioeconomic pressures.

## **Emergent Theme 4: Social Winds and Their Shadows.**

Participants' narratives highlighted the influential role of peer relationships in shaping academic engagement, vulnerability, and well-being. Supporting this observation, empirical evidence demonstrates that peer relationships are significantly linked to academic

achievement, both directly and indirectly through learning motivation and engagement (Shao et al., 2024). Beyond academic impacts, accounts involving non-consensual sexual encounters and resulting unplanned pregnancies align with documented patterns of sexual violence, where perpetrators are frequently known to the victim and incidents occur within existing peer or social networks (Lissmann et al., 2023). These experiences reflect broader global data indicating the prevalence of sexual violence among women and girls prior to adulthood. In parallel, literature on social relationships shows that the presence or absence of trusted friendships is associated with mental health outcomes, with social support and companionship linked to lower levels of depression and anxiety and to overall well-being across the life course (Choi et al., 2020). Together, these findings situate participants' experiences within established evidence on the dual role of peer relationships as sources of both support and risk.

### **Emergent Theme 5: The Labyrinth of Learning.**

Findings indicated that students' academic trajectories were shaped by intersecting pressures related to academic stress, curricular structure, and institutional navigation. Academic stress has been empirically linked to college dropout, with documented long-term consequences including reduced earning potential, diminished job security, and poorer mental and physical health outcomes (Gobena, 2024). Institutional factors further contributed to these challenges; studies identified outdated curricula, limited student support services, and constrained financial aid as conditions associated with declining enrollment and increased attrition (Lamichhane et al., 2025). Broader analyses also documented systemic institutional barriers—such as unclear degree requirements, limited course availability, and disadvantageous financial aid policies—that cumulatively impede student progression, particularly among economically disadvantaged learners (Abele, 2021). In addition, research on academic alignment revealed that course mismatch and poor early course selection significantly increased dropout risks, with effects persisting into later years of study (Sidek et al., 2023).

### **Emergent Theme 6: Crossroads of Changing Priorities.**

Participants' narratives highlight a critical juncture where immediate life demands—specifically employment and family responsibilities—supersede the deferred benefits of higher education. This observation mirrors national trends identified by Ceballos (2023), who notes that employment and marriage have overtaken financial constraints as the primary drivers of attrition. While this shift often addresses immediate needs, Bangquiao and Galigao (2025) caution that prioritizing short-term income frequently results in long-term economic vulnerability, relegating individuals to low-skilled, informal labor. Furthermore, Gault and Gault (2025) emphasize that for those exiting to raise families, the lack of a degree compromises multigenerational success, asserting that completing higher education remains the definitive path to sustainable financial stability.

## **Emergent Theme 7: The Echoes of Unfinished Dreams.**

Participants' narratives reveal that the consequences of dropping out extend far beyond the classroom, deeply impacting both socioeconomic stability and psychological well-being. Skrbinjek et al. (2024) frame this phenomenon not merely as a personal setback but as a broader societal issue that diminishes labor competitiveness and strains economic resources. This external pressure is compounded by internal emotional struggles; as individuals grapple with the fear of social rejection and the unfulfilled need for belonging (M1 Psychology, 2021), the stigma of the "unfinished" degree can become a significant psychological burden. To navigate these challenges, Aravind et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of psychological flexibility, suggesting that cultivating tolerance for distress and adaptive coping mechanisms is essential for individuals to reconcile their unfinished academic paths with their future aspirations.

## **Conclusions**

This study concludes that college dropout is best understood as a multidimensional and process-driven phenomenon, rather than the consequence of isolated individual shortcomings. The findings demonstrate that economic instability functions as the primary structural catalyst from which social, familial, health-related, and academic challenges emerge. Constraints commonly perceived as personal or relational—such as weakened peer engagement and altered family roles—were fundamentally shaped by persistent resource scarcity, positioning socioeconomic vulnerability as the underlying condition that precipitated discontinuation from higher education.

Financial precarity significantly reconfigured family responsibilities, compelling many participants—particularly eldest children and single parents—to assume caregiving and income-generating roles that superseded their academic pursuits. This reallocation of priorities reflects not a lack of commitment to education, but a rational response to immediate survival demands. Prolonged exposure to such pressures further undermined physical and psychological well-being, resulting in stress, illness, emotional exhaustion, and social withdrawal, while for some, social vices and maladaptive coping behaviors emerged as responses to sustained distress.

These intersecting burdens ultimately translated into academic disengagement, as institutional expectations and coursework became incompatible with employment obligations and shifting life trajectories. Faced with competing demands, participants redirected their efforts toward practical forms of stability, including work, entrepreneurship, and family formation. Despite disrupted educational pathways, the narratives reveal adaptive resilience and reflective maturity, marked by acceptance, personal growth, and alternative forms of learning. Collectively, these findings challenge deficit-oriented interpretations of college dropout and instead frame it as a contextually grounded process of adaptation, responsibility, and agency in the pursuit of long-term stability and meaning.

## Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, educational institutions are encouraged to institutionalize adaptive support systems, including flexible academic policies such as penalty-free de-loading and installment-based payment schemes supported by partnerships with alumni and corporate sponsors, to address financial and time-related constraints of working students. Policymakers should expand government subsidy and voucher programs to include economically disadvantaged students in accredited private institutions, thereby reducing exclusion from higher education while easing congestion in state universities. Families are advised to provide active academic support through open communication, direct monitoring of academic progress, and responsible financial oversight, while prioritizing course-career fit over prestige. Students are urged to exercise independent academic agency by aligning course choices with personal aptitudes, practicing financial discipline, and seeking early academic or psychosocial intervention when difficulties arise. Institutions should further integrate mental health and wellness services into core retention strategies through proactive, accessible counseling and peer-support mechanisms. Finally, future research may extend this inquiry across diverse contexts and employ quantitative or mixed method approaches to assess the prevalence of dropout factors and the effectiveness of intervention programs.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

This study strictly adhered to ethical protocols to safeguard the autonomy, dignity, and well-being of all participants. Following institutional approval from the Dean of the Graduate School, informed consent was secured from every participant, ensuring a clear understanding of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously maintained by removing all personal identifiers and restricting data access solely to the researcher. Furthermore, the study was guided by the principles of non-maleficence and justice—minimizing potential harm and ensuring equitable treatment—while also addressing beneficence by aiming to generate actionable insights into the academic trajectories of college dropouts to inform educational support systems.

To ensure methodological rigor, the study established trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was achieved by utilizing data collection methods that accurately captured the nuance of participants lived experiences. Transferability was facilitated through "thick description" of the research context and procedures, allowing for the findings to be evaluated for applicability in analogous settings. Dependability was maintained via a comprehensive audit trail that documented all methodological decisions to ensure consistency. Finally, confirmability was established by mitigating researcher bias and grounding all interpretations strictly in the empirical data, ensuring that conclusions objectively reflected the participants' perspectives.

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