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Between Desire and Necessity: Exploring the Academic and Emotional Struggles of College Students in Non-Preferred Degree Programs

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Abstract

Choosing a college program is a crucial stage in many young adults' academic journey, yet many of the students still enter degree programs that do not align with their interests due to financial constraints, family expectations, peer pressure, or limited options. In this explanatory sequential mixed-method study design, the academic and emotional struggles of the first year and third year Bachelor of Secondary Education Major in English were explored. 40 respondents from a state university located at Osmeña Boulevard, Cebu City, Philippines were chosen using the convenience sampling design. A validated questionnaire and interviews were utilized to gather the data for the study. Results showed that being in a non-preferred degree program is more challenging, but it does not add to the emotional struggles of the students in their academic work. Additionally, monetary practicality and family considerations were the main reasons as to why the students choose to enroll in non-preferred programs; and they are gradually developing coping strategies to enhance academic motivation. A total of ten themes emerged in exploring multifaceted student experiences in their current degree program. It is concluded that students can maintain emotional balance and a purposeful academic journey with sufficient support and effective coping mechanisms. It is recommended that educational institutions should strengthen their emotional and academic support systems.

Keywords: Non-Preferred Degree Program, Emotional Struggles, Academic Motivation, Coping Strategies

1. Introduction

The stage of making academic choices is an important decision for many young adults, but not all students end up in their desired degree program that truly suits their preferences and true interests, which leads to academic and emotional struggles. Research by Evans & Boucher (2015) [13] emphasizes that mismatches between student preferences and institutional placements, however, risk demotivation and poor performance. It is revealed in a recent research study that students who end up in non-preferred degree programs often end up experiencing higher levels of psychological distress, lower motivation, and decreased academic achievements compared to students in their preferred fields. For instance, a study of Ethiopian health science university students found that "academic preference-placement mismatches reduce motivation among students, directly and indirectly impairing academic performance" (Kebede, *et al*., 2025) [21]. Although factors influencing academic decisions and struggles faced during college transition have been explored by past research studies, there remain limited studies that specifically target the academic and emotional struggles faced by students who are enrolled in non-preferred degree programs. This gap seeks the need for deeper understanding as to how the academic and emotional well-being of the students are deeply affected by necessity-driven academic decisions. Therefore, using a mixed-method to gather data, this research study will aim to investigate the academic and emotional struggles faced by students in non-preferred degree programs to provide a comprehensive understanding of these struggles and formulate effective and informed strategies to provide better support to affected students.

Choosing a college program is a key decision for young adults, but many students enroll in programs they do not prefer due to

factors like family pressure, limited options, or financial constraints, leading to struggles in their studies and emotional well-being (Kebede *et al*., 2025) [21]. This mismatch often results in lower motivation, worse academic performance, and increased stress or unhappiness, making it hard for students to succeed and feel good at school. For example, research on Indonesian university students shows that those with high satisfaction in their major have better mental health and less distress compared to those with low satisfaction (Cahyawunan *et al*., 2022). In the Philippines, free-tuition schools attract students who may pick programs like Bachelor of Secondary Education major in English for affordability rather than interest, worsening these issues for first-year students. Studies from Thailand also highlight how poverty and lack of interest in education lead to struggles and dropout, emphasizing the need for better support strategies (Nicaise *et al*., 2000) [26]. Exploring this topic is crucial to develop ways to improve students' academic success and emotional health.

Recent research shows that students who experience misalignment between their academic preferences and assigned programs often face lower motivation, declined academic performance, and emotional challenges. Students are particularly vulnerable to stress due to their difficulty in adjusting to the learning process (Ali, 2018) [1]. A study of South Korean nursing students showed that those without clinical practice experience were more vulnerable to academic burnout. For those with clinical experience, stress and dissatisfaction with their chosen major were the more influential factors (Hwang & Kim, 2022) [18]. This suggests that the corresponding academic preparation does not match the academic expectation and thereby leading to emotional and educational stress. Similarly, research among undergraduate health science students in Ethiopia found that students who were placed in degree programs that matched their preferences had higher levels of motivation compared to those assigned to programs they did not prefer, and those students in non-preferred programs tended to have lower academic performance (Kebede *et al*., 2025) [21]. This suggests that program alignment can truly affect both motivation and academic performance of a student.

In addition, poor choice of an academic program can also harm the mental health of students (Ali, 2018) [1]. A quantitative study from Indonesian university students shows that students with a high major satisfaction had a high psychological well-being and low psychological distress, compared to students who have a low satisfaction major

(Cahyawunan *et al*., 2022). A qualitative study at Prince of Songkla University in Southern Thailand found that worries about being in a non-preferred assigned program are among the top five reasons students drop out (Sittichai, 2012) [32]. This shows that the misalignment between student preferences and programs is common, impacting students in many ways.

In the Philippine setting, research on the academic and emotional impact of being enrolled in non-preferred programs remains unexplored. Most local studies explore the factors, influences, and reasons in degree program decision-making, while other studies explain the problems in the high school transition to college. This lack of related local studies emphasizes a crucial need for comprehensive, mixed-methods research that specifically targets college students in non-preferred programs and explores how such misalignment affects their emotional and psychological challenges and academic performance.

Previous local studies on college students' struggles have largely focused on exploring the factors, influences, and the reasons in degree program decision making. While these studies provide important information, they often disregard the deeper issues such as the emotional and psychological aspects of students who are enrolled in degree programs they did not initially choose. This brings a gap in understanding how students' motivation, performance, and emotional well-being is affected by personal aspirations and academic path. Taking this gap is important because without a comprehensive understanding of these experiences, support programs may fail to address the real reason for students' stress, disengagement, and dissatisfaction. This explanatory mixed-method study sought to capture the personal experiences, academic and the emotional struggles of college students enrolled in non-preferred degree programs through extensive interviews and by answering questionnaires. By doing so, it will provide context-based insights that can guide more responsive student-academic advising, target mental health initiatives, and evidence-based policy in higher education.

2. Theoretical-Conceptual Framework
This study was anchored on Leon Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory and Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory, which explain how internal conflict and reduced intrinsic motivation emerge when students are enrolled in non-preferred degree programs. These factors contribute to the academic and emotional well-being of the students. The data gathered through a survey questionnaire were analyzed to identify patterns and help with the development of research-based coping strategies that aimed at improving students' motivation, performance, and overall well-being. The figure below presents the theoretical-conceptual framework for this study.
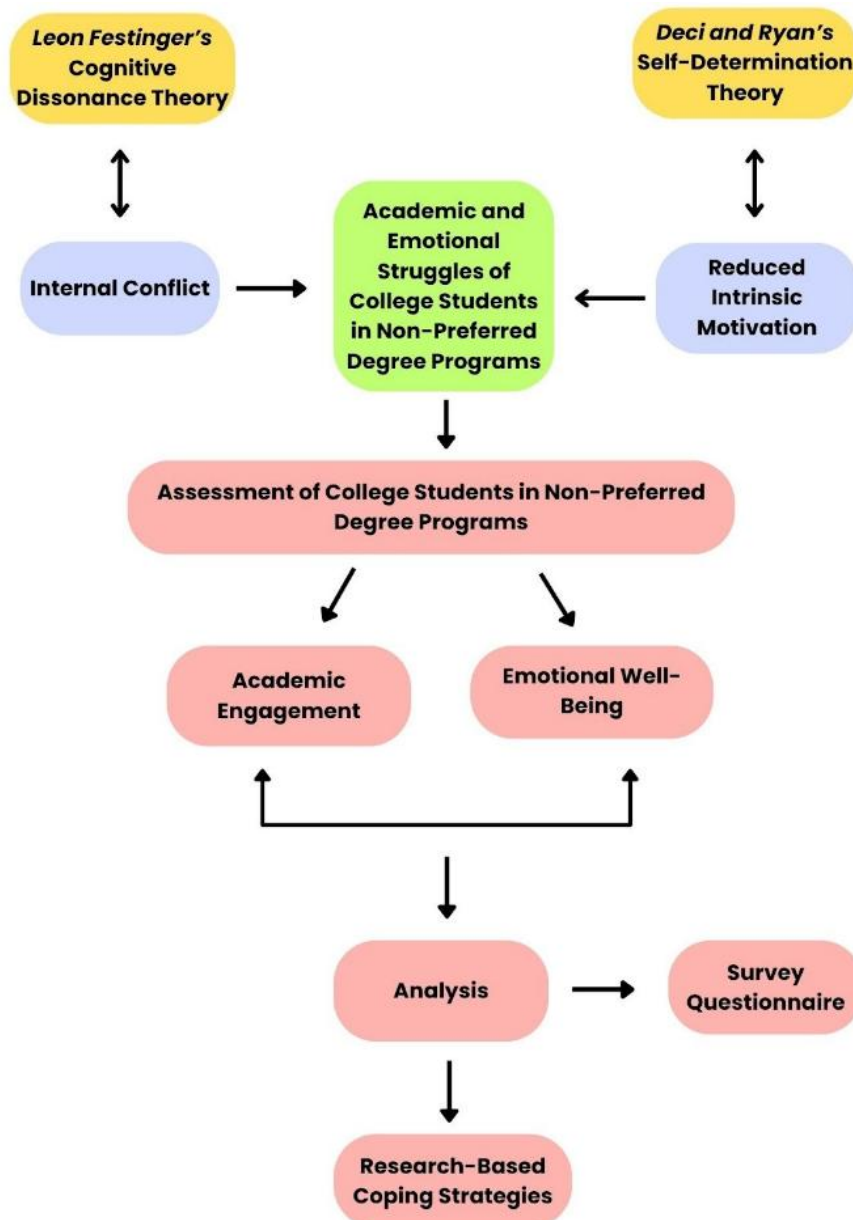
Fig 1: Theoretical-Conceptual Framework

Cognitive Dissonance Theory by Leon Festinger (1957)
Cognitive dissonance refers to the psychological discomfort encountered when an individual possesses two contradictory views or when their actions are incongruent with their beliefs, arising from a conflict between one's convictions and behaviors (McLeod, 2025) [25]. This theory explains why and how college students in non-preferred degree programs experience academic and emotional struggles.

Internal Conflict
Internal conflicts are inherent to individuals' everyday experience (Kleiman and Enisman, 2018) [20]. This inner conflict creates tension, pushing one to either change their behavior, adjust their beliefs, or find a way to justify the difference to feel better (McLeod, 2025) [25]. When college students' beliefs or desires contradict with the reality of their chosen degree program, it creates an internal conflict and discomfort. This conflict and discomfort drives the students to cope by changing their behavior and attitude which also affects their motivation and self-efficacy.

Self-Determination Theory by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (1985)
Self-Determination Theory (SDT) represents a comprehensive framework for the study of human motivation and personality development (Ryan and Vansteenkiste, n.d.). In contrast to most historical and contemporary approaches to human motivation, which treat motivation as a unitary concept - that is, one has more or less motivation - SDT has focused on various forms of motivation (from autonomous to controlled motivation) to predict outcomes such as performance, engagement, vitality, and psychological health (Ryan and Deci, 2024). This theory explains how college students in non-preferred degree programs experience different types of motivation which helps understand the students' academic and emotional struggles based on the quality of their motivation.

Reduced Intrinsic Motivation
Decades of scientific research demonstrate that intrinsic motivation (IM) is an effective "engine" for learning and positive growth. Motivation drives their engagement; the

engagement, in turn, creates experiences that reinforce their motivation (Larson and Rusk, 2011) [23]. Without clear interest, college students in non-preferred degree programs may feel less engaged, less energized, and less likely to perform well in class.

Assessment and Analysis
Assessment follows the same systematic process of collecting, analyzing and corroborating data from multiple sources that is fundamental in empirical research (California State University, Fullerton, 2022). College students enrolled in non-preferred degree programs will be assessed based on their academic engagement and emotional well-being. By evaluating these aspects, the study aims to gain insight into the challenges that college students face and to offer strategies to help them achieve academic success and emotional resilience.

Coping Strategies
Coping strategies are the thoughts and behaviors used to manage the internal and external demands of a stressful situation (Stephenson and DeLongis, 2020) [34]. Coping strategies were proposed to help college students in non-preferred degree programs improve their academic engagement, emotional well-being, and self-efficacy in learning.

3.0 Statement of the Problem
The main purpose of this study was to explore the academic and emotional struggles of college students who were in their non-preferred degree program. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the most common academic challenges experienced by students in their non-preferred degree program?
2. What are the factors that influenced the students' enrollment in their current degree program?
3. How do these students cope with not being in their preferred degree program?
4. What are the students' perceptions regarding the possible effect of their current program to their ability to achieve future career aspirations and personal goals?

4. Methodology
4.1 Research Design
This study utilized a mixed-method approach, specifically explanatory sequential design, to explore the academic and emotional struggles of college students in non-preferred degree programs, specifically first-year and third-year Bachelor of Secondary Education–Major in English students. The researchers used a Likert-scale questionnaire and in-depth interviews to gather data on the academic and emotional struggles of the students, which allowed them to express their thoughts and opinions without constraints. While the researchers used in-depth face-to-face interviews, that depended on the availability of the students.

4.2 Sampling Design, Research Respondents & Environments
Forty (40) respondents were chosen using the convenience sampling design. respondents were first-year and third-year students taking up Bachelor of Secondary Education–Major in English. The locale of the study was the state university located at Osmeña Boulevard, Cebu City, Philippines. The

locale of the study was chosen because the state university offers zero tuition for its college students. As a free tuition institution, numerous students choose to study in this institution because of its quality education, and of its intensive training provided for each program. However, there are students who have been forced to study at this institution even though it is not their preferred degree program just because it is free.

4.3 Research Instrument
For the quantitative phase of the study, the primary research instrument for the study was a researcher-developed questionnaire that consisted of Likert-scale questions, which aimed to gather responses about the academic and emotional struggles of first-year students enrolled in Bachelor of Secondary Education–Major in English despite their undesirability of the degree program. The questionnaire was developed based on the research objectives of the study and an extensive literature review related to the research objectives, ensuring that the questionnaire relates to their experiences and perceptions as students. To determine content validity, the questionnaire was evaluated by a panel of three experts in education, psychology, and research methodology, exploring the clarity, relevance, and completeness of the questions, and incorporating their suggestions in the final version.

For the qualitative phase, a semi-structured interview was used for follow-up questions during the data collection process. In this process, the researchers also functioned as the primary data-gathering instrument, serving as the interview guide. The interview guide had prompts and follow-up questions that are flexible, so the researchers can look into respondents' answers more deeply and in more detail. This format allowed respondents to share their ideas while still keeping the conversation on track with the goals of the study. The researchers used a mixed-method approach, specifically an explanatory sequential design, wherein the quantitative data found from the questionnaire was analyzed first by the researchers and was then further explained through the qualitative interview responses, ensuring a deeper understanding and validation of the findings.

4.4 Data Gathering Procedure
The researchers first obtained ethical clearance to guarantee that the research adheres to ethical standards. All research respondents' informed consent was obtained by clearly explaining the goal of the study, their voluntary involvement, and their ability to withdraw at any time. If the research participant is a minor, assent was required in addition to parental or guardian consent.

The mode of participation depended on the availability and preference of the respondents. For face-to-face data collection, printed copies of the consent form and survey questionnaire were provided, while online respondents received the same through Google Forms. Interviews conducted online were held via Google Meet, with the researchers providing the necessary link.

In line with the explanatory mixed-method approach, data collection was conducted in two phases. First, the quantitative phase which involved the distribution of survey questionnaires to determine the academic and emotional struggles of students in non-preferred degree programs. This was followed by qualitative semi-structured interviews designed to further enrich the quantitative results. Prior to

each interview, respondents were asked for permission to record the session for accurate transcription and analysis. Probing questions was used to gather deeper insights from the respondents. Finally, as a mark of appreciation, each research participant received a small token or compensation.

4.5 Data Analysis
The data collected from the survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were analyzed using both descriptive analysis and thematic analysis. For the quantitative data, descriptive measures such as the mean and standard deviation were computed to present and interpret the students' responses, providing insights of their academic and emotional challenges. The qualitative data, on the other hand, was examined through Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. This process involved familiarizing with the data by transcribing interviews and reviewing responses, generating initial codes to identify recurring ideas, and grouping these codes into potential themes such as "academic disengagement" or "emotional distress due to program mismatch." These themes were then defined and named to clearly represent the students' experiences, such as how internal conflicts or reduced motivation impact their performance and well-being. Finally, the findings were reported by first presenting the quantitative results, which were then explained and deepened through the qualitative themes, ensuring a systematic and comprehensive interpretation of the data.

4.6 Ethical Considerations
This research study ensured that no conflicts of interest greatly affected the integrity and results of the conducted research. In the process of gathering data, respondents were allowed to provide anonymous responses through Google Forms or questionnaires to protect their privacy, and the results were only accessible by the researchers. Informed online and printed consent was surely provided beforehand along with the needed information (purpose, procedures, etc.) so that respondents had the knowledge of what the research is all about, and feel safe throughout the entire participation. If ever the procedure or the process of gathering information caused any discomfort to the respondents, they were allowed to withdraw anytime without any difficulty. Researchers ensured that participation was voluntary amongst the students from state universities who were willing to take part in this study. Through this research, the researchers hoped to have provided deeper and valuable insights as well as improved support to students who are experiencing the same academic and emotional struggles.

5. Results and Discussion
Table 1 shows the demographic profile of students who have participated in the research. The results determined some personal information about the respondents on their year level and the block that they belong to.

Table 1: Demographic Profile

Description	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Block	A	5	12.5%
	B	14	35%
	C	19	47.5%
	D	2	5%
Year	1	32	80%
	3	8	20%

The table indicates that the majority of the respondents came from Block C (47.5%), followed by Block B (35%), then followed by smaller portions from Blocks A (12.5%) and D (5%). Moreover, most respondents were first-year students (80%), while the remaining (20%) were second-year students. This suggests that the perspectives gathered in this study are largely influenced by students that are still in the early stages of their academic journey, particularly those who are still adjusting to their degree program.

Table 2 shows the descriptive analysis of BSEd-English students regarding their academic and emotional experiences while enrolled in non-preferred degree programs. The results are organized into four major sections: Academic Motivation and Performance, Emotional Struggles and Burnout, Reasons for Enrolling in a Non-Preferred Program, and Coping and Positive Perspectives.

Table 2: Descriptive analysis of BSEd-English Students in their Non-Preferred Degree Programs

Questions	Mean	SD	Description
Academic Motivation & Performance			
1. I find it difficult to focus on lessons because I am not genuinely interested in my current degree program.	2.27	0.82	Disagree
2. I find it hard to accomplish schoolwork or tasks because I lack motivation.	2.52	0.82	Agree
3. I find it difficult to achieve academic success in a degree program I am not genuinely interested in.	2.35	0.95	Disagree
4. I think my academic performance would be better if I were in a degree program I genuinely preferred.	3.4	0.78	Strongly Agree
5. My current program negatively affects my confidence and self-esteem, making it difficult for me to participate in class and avoid judgment from classmates.	2.35	1.03	Disagree
6. I need to exert effort to push myself to study since this is not the program I originally wanted to pursue.	2.8	1.14	Agree
AMP AVG	2.69	0.68	Agree
Emotional Struggles & Burnout			
7. I frequently experience burnout because I lack passion for the subjects I am taking.	2.77	0.84	Agree
8. I often experience emotional distress due to academic burnout in my current program.	2.73	0.91	Agree
9. My academic and emotional well-being is negatively affected by being in a non-preferred program.	2.4	0.81	Disagree
10. I feel unfulfilled and dissatisfied because I am enrolled in a degree program I do not prefer.	2.38	0.87	Disagree

11. I sometimes consider shifting or dropping out because of the academic difficulties I encounter in this program.	2.13	1.02	Disagree
12. I sometimes feel that my efforts in this program are meaningless or unproductive.	2.33	0.97	Disagree
ESB AVG	2.46	0.68	Disagree
Reasons for Enrolling in a Non-Preferred Program			
13. I enrolled in this program because of the influence of my family.	2.7	1.14	Agree
14. I enrolled in this program because of the influence of my peers.	2.27	1.18	Disagree
15. I enrolled in this program because I think it was easier to get into than my desired program.	2.75	1.08	Agree
16. I was forced to enroll in this program because of my financial condition.	2.9	1.11	Agree
17. I enrolled in this program because I believed it would provide better job opportunities after graduation.	3.27	0.82	Strongly Agree
18. I did not pass into the desired program I applied to, which led me to be reconsidered for my current program.	1.93	1.21	Disagree
RENPP AVG	2.64	0.55	Agree
Coping & Positive Perspectives			
19. I push myself to adapt by developing new study habits and strategies suited for this program.	3.15	0.74	Agree
20. I try to cope with negative feelings by focusing on how to excel in my current program.	3.3	0.69	Strongly Agree
21. I believe that despite being in a non-preferred program, the skills and knowledge I gain will still contribute to my personal growth and future opportunities.	3.65	0.66	Strongly Agree
22. My current program has helped me develop skills that are valuable beyond my preferred career choice.	3.23	0.70	Agree
23. When I feel discouraged about my current program, I cope by seeking support from peers, mentors, or family.	2.73	1.04	Agree
24. I try to develop a positive mindset toward my current program, even if it's not my desired one.	3.05	0.96	Agree
CPP AVG	3.18	0.47	Agree

Range of values Description
1.00 - 1.74 Strongly Disagree
1.75 - 2.49 Disagree
2.50 - 3.24 Agree
3.25 - 4.00 Strongly Agree

A four-point Likert scale questionnaire was used as the instrument for the quantitative phase of the research, which reflects the respondents' level of agreement with statements related to their academic challenges, emotional well-being, enrollment circumstances, and coping strategies. The table summarizes the mean scores, standard deviations, and corresponding descriptive interpretations, providing a detailed overview of how students perceive and navigate their current academic pathway despite it not being their initial program of choice.

Academic Motivation & Performance
The table shows the respondents' general affirmation on how currently being in a non-preferred degree program has negatively impacted their academic motivation and performance. The majority of the respondents strongly agreed that their academic performance would be better if they were in a degree program of their choice, and they showed awareness of how their situation caused challenges such as a decrease in motivation and effort. However, some respondents disagreed, indicating that being in a non-preferred degree program does not severely affect their psychological and mental well-being, nor does it hinder them from adapting and striving to achieve academic success. According to Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT), autonomy is one of the main factors that drives intrinsic motivation, enhancing effort, engagement, motivation, and overall academic success; thus, misalignment will only lead to dissatisfaction, demotivation, and poor performance (Kebede *et al*. 2025) [21]. However, academic resilience enables the students to successfully deal with impediments, pressure, and challenges in the school settings and attain academic achievement in spite of a difficult circumstance in the educational process (Kalaivani, D. 2021) [19]. This implies that universities should encourage the provision of appropriate initiatives, such as establishing counseling and motivational support programs to aid the students in sustaining their motivation and performance, as well as to enhance their academic resilience and self-determination skills to effectively adapt and find fulfillment in their current academic paths.

Emotional Struggles & Burnout
The table shows that the respondents generally disagreed with the statements related to emotional struggles and burnout, which means that most of them rarely feel drained, frustrated, or unmotivated in their academic work. This result suggests that the respondents are emotionally stable and capable of managing school-related stress. They may have developed resilience, effective coping mechanisms, and a clear sense of purpose that help them stay motivated and engaged despite academic pressures. Moreover, this finding reflects a positive academic environment where students can maintain balance and well-being even during challenging situations. According to Önder *et al*. (2025) [28], students who manage their time effectively and minimize procrastination are less likely to experience burnout and emotional exhaustion. Similarly, Andargeery *et al*. (2025) [2] found that students with strong self-confidence and adequate emotional support tend to experience lower levels of stress and are more persistent in their academic goals. The agreement among the results indicates that the respondents' ability to manage emotions and stress aligns with broader research on academic well-being. It is suggested that schools continue to implement and strengthen programs that promote mental health awareness, emotional support, and stress management strategies to sustain students' emotional stability and academic success.

Reasons for Enrolling in a Non-Preferred Program
The table shows the respondents' decisions to enroll in non-preferred programs were mainly driven by practicalities and family-related considerations rather than social or academic failures. The belief in better employment opportunities also plays a major role that shows career considerations outweigh personal preference while financial limitations further

strengthen their decision-making in settling for a program within their means. These results suggest that students prioritize practical concerns and recognize employment opportunities when choosing programs rather than social pressures from peers. Previous studies show that course/track choices likewise find parental/financial and career factors to be dominant variables, while peers play a smaller role for many students. These results aligned with Kilag (2023) [22] who identified that career prospects, academic readiness and family/financial aspects are primary drivers of track or course selection in the Philippines. However, according to Eszter Vit (2024) it partially disagrees that peers play a smaller role for many students and emphasizes that peers has a strong effect on adolescents' academic decision-making and reviews show that peers can highly influence attitudes and motivations but their impact on concrete course choices is often smaller or context-dependent. It is suggested that universities and guidance counselors should therefore prioritize career counseling, providing clear information about program outcomes, and financial counseling while providing peer-support programs that utilize positive peer influence.

Coping & Positive Perspectives
The table shows how respondents handle their current degree program despite a mismatch with their preferences. The results reveal that the respondents are gradually developing coping mechanisms to enhance their academic motivation. They are exerting effort in finding study habits and strategies that are suited for their current program, and they are coping with their negative feelings by exerting effort to excel and seeking help from peers, teachers, and family. Such behavior helps them cope with their situation, despite studying in a degree program that they do not prefer. With this, many respondents recognize that their current program offers skills and opportunities they could use in the future and appreciate how these could contribute to their personal growth, leading them to develop a more positive mindset toward their academic journey. While some of the respondents are still uncertain about their overall growth, the findings show that they are still learning to adapt and finding value in their situation. Their responses can be found agreeable with the study of Cai and Meng (2025) [9], which emphasizes that academic resilience and teacher support significantly influence students' ability to overcome barriers and maintain motivation in their studies. A study by Dancel et al. (2024) [12] also confirms their statements, as this study highlighted that pre-service teachers who actively develop coping styles, like seeking peer or mentor support, experience less burnout and greater academic satisfaction. These findings reflect that the respondents continue to value their personal growth and self-improvement despite studying in a non-preferred program, which suggests a stronger and more consistent teacher-support system in fostering their resilience and positive mindset.

Lived Experiences of Students in a Non-Preferred Degree Program
In this study, ten (10) themes were identified, namely: (1) financial considerations, (2) opportunity, (3) decision-making, (4) emotional awareness, (5) growth, (6) resiliency, (7) fostering positive relationships, (8) self-reflection, (9) learning challenges, and (10) aspiration.

Theme 1. Financial Considerations

Snowdon et al. (2006) [33] define financial consideration as the funding or cost related factors that plays an important role in decision making. This is considered as one of the major factors that influences the decision of an individual before proceeding with the decision.

"Also, since I have a chance for free education here at CNU, they wouldn't have to spend much." - R2

"My first choice (degree program) was Maritime (Engineering) but because we are currently financially unstable, we cannot afford the tuition. Gladly, I was able to pass in CNU with this degree program (BSEd-English)" - R7

"Yes, actually. In our barangay, education students are more prioritized when it comes to scholarships, which helped lessen my family's financial burden. The scholarship benefits I receive really help ease that load." - R9

R2, R7, and R9 states that financial considerations are one of their priorities in choosing a university. Their response showed that they chose to choose a university with free tuition to lessen the financial burden. Added to these statements is the study of Villaruz et al. (2023) [5], which also emphasizes that most of the students choose free institutions, especially students that come from poor socioeconomic backgrounds, to lessen the financial burden of paying for tuition, home rental, books, and other academic expenses. These responses show that students put their financial status into consideration before deciding whether to enroll in a desired program/school or to apply for a government-funded university to increase their chances of finishing their education. This implies that a state university who offers free tuition helps lessen the financial stress for learners, and offers them more chances to achieve a degree without spending a huge amount of money for tuition fees.

Theme 2. Opportunity
Opportunities can be characterized as qualifying activities that provide a person with an advantageous position (Hansson, 2004). It means that an individual receives or gains a favorable choice that helps them to improve or achieve something that is beneficial for them.

"I'll just stick with it, because it's really a privilege to be able to study here at CNU. Many people want to study here, so it would feel wrong for me to waste that opportunity." - R2

"What keeps me committed is the fact that it is my comfort zone, as well as me being a part of an institution that's funded by the government, which means I don't need to release a huge sum just to continue my education." - R5

"As far as we know, there are so many students who (want) to study in CNU who were not able to pass. This is one of the reasons why I decided to grab the opportunity and take this degree program." - R7

R2, R5, and R7 shared similar reasons for choosing to enroll at the university, stating that it is funded by the government and highly pursued after by many students. In the study of Gerona et al. (2023) [5], it was highlighted that many students believe that free higher education offers students a way to lessen the financial burden of their education, may have

satisfactory experiences, and a stronger sense of motivation to continue their tertiary education. The responses provided emphasizes how the learners' decisions were primarily shaped by the opportunities that the university offers and the prestige associated with being part of the community. Therefore, it is essential for the university to ensure that the quality of education and services it promotes are consistent.

Theme 3. Decision-making
Decision-making refers to the process of selecting the most appropriate and promising option from two or more available choices (Beach, 1993) [4]. It emphasizes that an individual has the ability to choose the most desirable choice among all options presented.

"My mother talked to two lawyers and mentioned that I wanted to study law. They recommended that I take a pre-law course, not political science, but rather a Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSED). Both lawyers suggested BSED English, so my mother agreed. She said that at least I would still be taking something related to law." -R2

"I applied for (a) bachelor of science in psychology and unfortunately, I wasn't able to pass (the) examination. So, I sent a recommendation letter to the VPAA. Luckily, I was able to get into the university but under a different program and that is bachelor of secondary education, major in English." - R5

"I initially enrolled in BS Architecture because it was my dream course and something I was truly passionate about. But during the pandemic, I faced a lot of challenges — financially and academically. Eventually, I made the decision to shift to a more practical and manageable program. I chose Education, specifically majoring in English, because I've always had a deep love for reading, writing, and speaking." - R8

R2, R5, and R8 explained that their choice for enrolling in BSEd-English is primarily not their first choice, and some of them were only reconsidered to the current degree program after being redirected by their desired program. Some respondents also highlighted how they made their choices out of practicality over passion in order to continue their education. These statements can be supported by the study of Briones (2019) [29], which states that a learner's choice of degree program can be influenced by a wide range of factors. All the responses provided by the respondents determine how extrinsic factors can also significantly influence their choice of degree program. These findings highlight the respondents' ability to decide critically and prioritize practicality over their desired programs, suggesting that the learners' decisions were shaped not only by their personal motivation, but also by external factors such as family influence, financial stability, or redirection of degree programs.

Theme 4. Self-Awareness
Self awareness is a process of understanding one's feelings and behaviors which includes more accurate understanding of how different factors affect their emotional state as well as how it affects the behavior and emotional state of others. (Hadi & Gharaibeh, 2023) [15]. It means that an individual is consciously aware of what is happening and acknowledges how these emotions affect behavior and decision-making.

"I guess I am okay now and I can say that I have already moved on from my first chosen degree program." - R7

"Emotionally, I feel more stable now compared to the time I was struggling in Architecture." - R8

"I often had breakdowns, thinking about whether I made the right decision in taking BSEd-English instead of Political Science. Over time, things have become a bit better, but I still struggle sometimes." - R9

"My emotional well-being has improved because I've learned to accept and appreciate where I am….By focusing on growth instead of setbacks, I'm able to stay motivated and enjoy the journey." R10

R7, R8, and R10 showed understanding of their own emotions and were able to respond to the current situation they are in, which is enrolled in their non-preferred degree program. R9 acknowledges ongoing internal struggles despite progress, uncertainty regarding the chosen program is still experienced. On the other hand, Appreciation for being in this path was also expressed by R10. Focusing on growth other than negativity helped in staying motivated and served as a reminder to enjoy the journey than torment it. Hadi & Gharaibeh (2023) [15] reaffirms that self-awareness enables students to monitor their current state and manage it while striving towards academic goals with their non-preferred program.

Theme 5. Growth
Having a growth-oriented mindset helps in overcoming difficulties faced along the path. Leppänen & Rodrigues-Aunapuu (2024) [24] stated that growth-oriented work culture emphasized continuous learning and professional development. This is one important aspect of an individual's success and motivation.

"I learned to focus on growth rather than comparison and to give my best no matter what path I'm in. … I tell myself that this is the path I chose when I was given other options, so I need to give my best in return." - R3

"…. I had to create detailed lesson plans and deliver them confidently. It was overwhelming at first, but I got through it by preparing thoroughly, asking for guidance from my mentors, and practicing with friends." - R8

"Since I started this program, I've changed my mindset a lot. Before, especially in senior high school, I would only study right before exams. But now, I make sure to study consistently—sometimes for an entire week if exams or quizzes are coming up. Even when there aren't any quizzes, I still try to study in advance." - R9

"I struggled when we had to write essays and analyze challenging topics. But instead of giving up, I pushed myself to practice more and ask (for) help when needed." - R10

R3 expressed a strong commitment to focus on self-growth rather than comparing oneself to others who have taken the degree program they want. R8 and R10 shared how they prepare and give effort in doing things especially on the things that they have not done before. They emphasized the

importance of persistence and hard work when faced with demanding tasks. Additionally, they did not forget to highlight the role of external help whenever needed. This approach is supported by Suman (2023) [35], who highlighted that cultivating a growth mindset gives students greater independence, improved educational experiences, and prepares them for success in their future endeavors. R9 described a shift of mindset after entering college which was from last-minute studying to proactive learning methods. The growth-oriented mindset of the respondents are evident in their answers which illustrates how it helped them overcome struggles and strive for improvement in their academic journey.

Theme 6. Resiliency
Davidson *et al.*, (2005) defined resilience as one's capability to recover or bounce back after facing adversities in life. The word is derived from Latin words *"salire"* which means to leap or jump, and *"resilire"* which means to spring back. This refers to an ability to adapt, recover, and thrive amidst challenges.

"At the start, it was really nerve-wracking because, like, "Oh no, this is college already." You pressure yourself a lot. But eventually, you get to adjust, and college starts to feel a bit lighter…" - R2

"In the beginning, I often felt pressured and unsure of myself, especially because everything felt new and unexpected. Over time, though, I've grown more confident and emotionally stable. I've learned to handle challenges better, to trust the process, and to find joy in small accomplishments." - R3

The statements of the respondents reflects their resiliency when faced with challenges involving adjustment and growth in transitioning into BSEd-English as their degree program. R2 expressed overwhelming feelings due to transitioning to college which slowly became better over time. This can be supported by Pooley & Cohen (2010), as cited in Cassidy, S. (2015) emphasis on resilience as choosing on both internal and external resources to respond effectively to different contextual and developmental challenges. Additionally, R3 stated how uncertain and pressuring it was initially, but eventually gained confidence and ability to cope with challenges in better ways. Despite the initial stress, the respondents were able to navigate through it and gain balance and confidence. This mirrors how resiliency supports students in navigating academic transitions and uncertainties.

Theme 7. Fostering Positive Relationships
Fostering positive relationships among individuals in the classroom is essential for building an environment that supports social, emotional, and academic growth (Cervantes & Gutierrez, 2019). It means creating and maintaining good connections with others that are built on trust, respect, and open communication to promote a healthy and supportive environment.

"I'm still looking forward to meeting professors I can connect with as the semesters go by." - R1

"Maybe my experience in this program wouldn't be this enjoyable if it weren't for the people I'm with. I can't say for sure, but so far, I think my experience has become better

because of the people around me." - R2

"I have a pretty good foundation when it comes to my relationship with my peers and professors, even though there are times where I can really feel the animosity, but it's not that deep as far as how I view it and because of that, I can feel the sense of being at ease with my program even though it's not my first choice or it's not what I desired." - R5

R1, R2, and R5 shared that their experiences in the program were mainly shaped by the people around them. Their enjoyment and sense of comfort in the program came from the good relationships they have with their peers and professors. OECD (2015) confirms that schools greatly influence students' quality of life by shaping their relationships with others and their attitudes toward learning and life in general. The responses provided emphasize how meaningful connections greatly influence students' experiences in the program. Forming positive relationships with others, especially with peers and professors, allows students to feel a deeper sense of belonging. Schools should create more opportunities for interaction and collaboration among students and professors. Strengthening these connections can further enhance students' overall well-being in the academic environment.

Theme 8. Self-Reflection
Self-reflection is a moment when a person turns their attention inward and views themselves as the object of their own thoughts (Gillespie, 2007). It involves examining one's decisions, motivations, and circumstances with awareness. Through this process, individuals are able to recognize what aligns with their needs and values, guiding them toward more meaningful and suitable choices.

"... But I tried my best, and I realized that it's actually not bad, not a bad program at all. It helped me, especially in my course now, it helped shape who I am." - R4

"Still, there's a part of me that feels like I was meant to do more, that I had a different path waiting for me, but circumstances led me here instead." - R8

R4 and R8 took time to look back on their choices and how these shaped them. Through reflecting on their journey, they recognized both the growth they gained from their current path and the lingering thoughts of other possibilities they might have taken. This highlights that reflection is not just about clarity, but also about acknowledging unresolved feelings in one's journey. Huldtgren *et al.* (2014) [17] confirms that when individuals pay closer attention to their personal values, they tend to make decisions that fit them better. These responses highlight how self-reflection guides individuals in reassessing their decisions when faced with personal or external challenges. When people take time to reflect on themselves, they are able to recognize when their initial choices no longer fit their current circumstances, needs, or priorities. Through this process, they gain clarity about what matters to them and what they can realistically manage. This implies that taking time to reflect can help individuals make sense of where they are now, even when their path was not what they originally imagined.

Theme 9. Learning Challenges

Learning challenges present a complicated concern in the academic field and can influence a learner's performance in school (Baiti *et al*., 2024) [3]. It refers to difficulties students face in understanding lessons, managing academic tasks, and adjusting to learning environments. These challenges can affect how well they perform and participate in school.

"We didn't have any free time—we studied every day so that on the day of the research congress, we were ready. We even went several days without sleep just to prepare." - R1

"My real struggle right now isn't the exams; they're manageable, but it's the activities. Most of them are in groups, and there are just so many groupings that sometimes I get confused about which group I'm in, what I'm supposed to do, or when something is due. Like, I'd think the deadline is next week, but it's actually tomorrow. The groupings can really mix up your details." - R2

"It was during the online classes when I really struggled because our internet connection wasn't stable, and my phone also had charging issues. My mind would wander a lot since, in online classes, the teacher couldn't really see what we were doing, and I admit I took that as an advantage, which was unhealthy for me. I didn't learn much during that time, and it was really difficult because I couldn't understand the lessons well." - R9

R1, R2, and R9 experienced learning challenges including heavy academic workloads, overlapping group tasks, and other difficulties brought by online learning setup. These challenges made it difficult for them to manage their time, stay focused, and fully engage in their academic responsibilities. This supports the theme by showing that learning challenges can slow down the teaching and learning process and negatively impact students' academic performance and emotional well-being. Baiti *et al*. (2024) [3] confirms that learning challenges impact not only the students' grades but also how they see themselves and cope in school. These responses show that learning challenges can make academic responsibilities heavier and more stressful. When students face heavy workloads or difficulties in adjusting to the learning environment, their focus and self-efficacy can be affected. Providing clearer instructions, manageable task pacing, and accessible support can help students handle their academic responsibilities more effectively while also maintaining their personal well-being.

Theme 10. Aspiration
Aspirations refer to the goals or ambitions a person wants to achieve in life (Cherry, 2025). It represents what individuals hope to accomplish in the future, guiding their decisions and motivation toward personal growth and success.

"I want to be successful in life. My parents also remind me to keep going and finish my studies. I'm doing this not only for them but also for myself, so I won't face problems in the future once I graduate." - R1

"My goals in life, my family, and my personal dreams keep me committed. They always remind me why I started and encourage me to keep going, even when things get tough." - R3

"... Instead, they should focus on the thought that this might be the way for them to help their parents." - R9

R1, R3, and R9 stated that their experience reflects a sense of purpose and gratitude toward their family. The importance of viewing their journey as an opportunity to give back to their parents was clearly emphasized. This shows that their motivation is rooted in helping and honoring their family through their efforts and achievements. Rothon *et al*. (2010) [30] confirms that previous studies indicate that a student's level of educational aspiration can significantly shape their academic performance and future achievements. This highlights how aspirations serve as a driving force that motivates students to persevere and work hard toward their goals even when they are in a non-preferred degree program. It shows that having the desire to give back to one's parents can inspire commitment and resilience. Educators and institutions should nurture students' aspirations through providing them with proper guidance, encouragement, and opportunities to explore their goals. Helping learners connect with their personal goals and aspirations in life can help strengthen their sense of purpose and persistence toward success.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation
Conclusion
This study revealed that although students in non-preferred degree programs experience reduced academic motivation, many are still able to adapt through consistent effort and positive coping strategies. Quantitative results showed that while motivation is affected, most students do not experience severe emotional distress or burnout, and their enrollment decisions were largely shaped by practical and family-oriented factors. With the support of their family and peers, the students are beginning to acknowledge the positive aspects and potential benefits of their current program and how these may contribute to the success of their future goals. Qualitative results supported these findings by highlighting students' experiences with financial concerns, opportunity, growth, resiliency, and self-reflection in shaping their academic and emotional experiences. Through academic resilience, self-determination, and strong support systems, most of the learners were able to adapt successfully and find a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment in the academic path that they are currently taking. Overall, the study concludes that with sufficient support and effective coping strategies, students in non-preferred degree programs can still maintain emotional balance and a sense of purpose in their academic journey.

Recommendation
With the students in non-preferred degree programs still learning to adjust and relying on support mechanisms to maintain motivation, it is recommended that institutions must strengthen their academic and emotional support systems. Teachers and program chairs should provide consistent guidance, mentorship, and encouragement to help students develop a proper and positive mindset toward their current program. They may also implement targeted interventions, such as counseling and peer-support groups, to help foster an environment that supports them from their struggles and develop their growth. With this, institutions can enhance students' well-being and academic performance. Future studies that focus on the same topic may be improved by diving deeper in diverse samples across different programs

such as Filipino Majors, Math Majors, and Science Majors, and to know why they chose to enroll in a non-preferred degree program. It is also recommended that future researchers may also include findings that come from students that are enrolled in a preferred program to have a comparison of factors affecting learners' choice of degree programs from students enrolled in a non-preferred program. Lastly, future researchers can further extend their inquiry through cross-cultural comparisons and investigations in a diverse educational setting. By these, researchers can have a deeper understanding of their research study.

7. Acknowledgement

8. References
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