Retention Challenges Encountered by Students of Apayao State College: A Basis of an Institutional Intervention

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ABSTRACT

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| Student retention has been a critical issue in Higher Education Institutions. Students face various challenges as they journey in the completion of their tertiary education. This study investigated six (6) students who shifted to other course and/or transferred to other learning institution. A qualitative research, using Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) enabled the researcher to determine the motivations, challenges and factors influencing the students to shift courses and/or transfer to other schools. Data were gathered through one-on-one in-depth interviews. A interview guide was used in obtaining data from the students-respondents. Data were transcribed, coded, and categorized to obtain the results of the study. The themes identified based on the motivations to enroll were: proximity and convenience, family/peer/guidance influence, circumstantial enrollment/lack of alternatives; on challenges experienced by the students: pre-enrollment guidance and decision making, academic preparedness and progression, faculty expertise and quality, policy clarity and consistency; on factors influencing students to shift and/or transfer: financial constraints, academic difficulty and performance, and impact of external factors. Based on the findings, it is recommended that the administration should bolster the information drive during career campaign, creation and strengthening of the admission and retention policy and synchronize the grading system across all the programs. |

*Keywords: Student retention, interpretative phenomenological approach, motivations, challenges*

1. INTRODUCTION

Student retention in higher education has emerged as a critical issue globally. While many students begin their academic journey with enthusiasm, various challenges often hinder their ability to complete their degrees. Financial difficulties, academic preparedness, mental health concerns, and lack of institutional support are significant barriers to student persistence. Tinto 2012, emphasizes that retention is influenced by a student’s experiences both inside and outside the classroom. Financial constraints and mental health struggles are frequently cited as major causes of dropout, while academic preparedness remains a crucial determinant of success. UNESCO 2019, reports that institutional policies play a vital role in addressing these barriers to improve retention rates globally.

In Southeast Asia, including ASEAN member countries, similar trends in student retention have been observed. Socio-cultural factors also play a significant role, as students from diverse backgrounds face difficulties in adapting to university life. The ASEAN University Network 2020, notes that financial instability, lack of institutional support, and challenges in balancing work and studies are widespread issues for students across the region. Cultural expectations and family responsibilities often push students to prioritize work or caregiving over academic pursuits, leading to higher dropout rates. To improve retention, higher education institutions (HEIs) in ASEAN must address both financial and non-financial barriers to student success.

In the Philippines, retention issues are deeply rooted in financial limitations, as reflected in the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act (Republic Act No. 10931). This law aims to make higher education more accessible by offering free tuition in state universities and colleges (SUCs) along with additional financial support programs. Despite these initiatives, challenges such as academic unpreparedness, socio-cultural pressures, and mental health concerns persist. According to Reyes 2021, financial barriers continue to hinder many students, particularly those from economically disadvantaged households. The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) 2022, acknowledges that the shift to flexible learning modalities has introduced new challenges, such as technological barriers and inconsistent access to resources, which further complicate retention efforts.

Regionally, these national and international trends are evident in Northern Luzon, particularly in Apayao. Apayao State College (ASC), like many other SUCs, faces considerable challenges in retaining students. Dumaguin 2021. identifies financial difficulties, academic struggles, and socio-cultural barriers as unique challenges students in rural and indigenous communities face. Institutional support is crucial, particularly for first-generation college students who often struggle to adapt to college life. Salcedo 2020, emphasizes that improving retention in rural HEIs requires a holistic approach that addresses students' academic and personal challenges.

Locally, Apayao State College faces unique challenges. Students from indigenous and economically disadvantaged backgrounds experience multiple barriers that hinder their ability to continue their education. Despite efforts to provide financial assistance and academic support, students continue to drop out due to various challenges.

This study aims to determine challenges that have impacted student retention at Apayao State College, Conner Campus. By exploring these challenges faced by students, this research will be a basis for an institutional intervention. Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that more students complete their degrees and contribute to the socio-economic development of the nation.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Generally, this study was conducted to determine the retention challenges encountered by students of Apayao State College Conner campus. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the motivations of the respondents to enroll?
2. What are the challenges experienced by the respondents?
3. What are the factors influencing the respondents to shift and/or transfer?
4. What institutional intervention can be proposed to address the retention challenges?

3. methodology

**3.1. Research Design**

This study is qualitative research using a phenomenological research design to determine the retention challenges encountered by students of Apayao State College-Conner Campus. In-depth and series of interviews was used to extract answers from the respondents.

**3.2. Locale of the Study**

The study was conducted at Apayao State College Conner Campus.

**3.3. Respondents of the Study**

The study's respondents are students who enrolled in ASC for the 1st semester but shifted to other programs or transferred to other school. The researcher used purposive sampling based on the secondary data taken from the registrar’s record during AY 2023-2024.

**3.4. Research Instrumentation**

Generally, this study was conducted to determine the retention challenges encountered by students of Apayao State College Conner campus. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

**3.5. Data Gathering Procedure**

The researcher asked permission from the Campus Dean to conduct the study. Followed by the request to the College Registrar to gather secondary data on who are currently enrolled for the 1st semester, SY 2023-2024 but shifted to other programs or transferred to other schools for the 2nd semester, SY 2023-2024. Upon identifying the names, individual interviews were conducted to target respondents to extract answers on what retention challenges they have experienced which paved their decision to shift to another course of the College or transferred to other schools.

Data extracted from the respondents were gathered, clustered, and put into core themes. Moreover, narratives with verbatim excerpts from the respondents’ interviews will substantiate the themes and provide evidence for the interpretations.

4. results and discussion

**4.1. Motivation to Enroll at Apayao State College**.

**4.1.1. Proximity and Convenience**

Recognizing the geographical realities of the region, Apayao State College serves as a vital hub for accessible higher education. For a significant portion of its student population, the choice to enroll is driven by the college's strategic location, offering a convenient and logistically feasible option for pursuing academic goals without the need for extensive travel or relocation.

“*Ayaw ko kasing malalayo sa lugar namin, at libre ang tuition sa ASC”* (I don’t want to go far from our place, and ASC offers free tuition) says Respondent 2. Moreover, Respondent 6 said “*Bakit sa malayo pa eh may mas malapit naman” (*Why go far if there’s available school nearby).

While focused in Canada, the study of Frenette, 2004 examines the impact of geographic proximity to post-secondary institutions on participation rates. Findings suggest that students living closer to colleges and universities are more likely to enroll. On the other study by Perna, 2000, while focusing on racial differences in the US, touches upon how factors like geographic accessibility can disproportionately affect enrollment for certain student populations who may be less likely to relocate for education.

**4.1.2. Family/Peer/Guidance Influence.**

For many students in the region, the decision to pursue higher education at Apayao State College is deeply rooted in familial precedent and the influence of peer and/or guidance counselors during career campaigns. With siblings and potentially other family members having successfully navigated their academic journeys within the institution, Apayao State College often represents a familiar and trusted pathway for aspiring learners in the community.

“*Dito nag graduate ang isa kong kapatid kaya dito na rin ako” (*One of my siblings graduated here, so I enrolled here) said Respondent 4. Respondent 1 also have her siblings studied at ASC that’s why she’d also enrolled at ASC “*Halos lahat ng mga kapatid ko ay sa ASC nag aral, kaya dito ako nag-enroll”* (All my siblings studied at ASC, that’s why I enrolled here)*.* Moreover, Respondent 5 said *“During my Senior High School year, ASC conducted career campaign and I was encouraged to enroll because of the benefits and support for the students”*

While focused in Japan, the study of Ishiwata, 2006 highlights the significant role of family expectations, advice, and educational background in shaping students' college decisions. Findings suggest that parents' education level and values often influence their children's aspirations and choices. Another study in Bangladesh underscores how parental guidance and family opinions often steer students toward specific academic paths and institutions **Hossain & Hossain,** 2012.

A Philippine-based study conducted by Reyes, 2011 likely explores how family dynamics, support systems, and expectations impact students' motivation and academic outcomes. It could shed light on how family tradition influences the choice of institution.

**4.1.3. Circumstantial Enrollment/Lack of Alternatives.**

While Apayao State College may be the preferred choice for many, for some students, enrollment may arise from a set of circumstances or a limitation of immediate alternatives. Factors such as missed enrollment opportunities elsewhere or the need for a readily available educational option within the province can lead students to choose Apayao State College. This study acknowledges the reality of circumstantial enrollment, exploring the experiences of students who may have enrolled at Apayao State College due to a lack of other immediate options and investigating how the institution can best support their academic journeys.

Respondent 1 says “*Dahil di ko nahabol ang enrollment sa Manila para sa kursong Nursing, napilitan akong mag enroll dito sa ASC”* (Because I was not able to catch-up on the enrollment process at Manila, I am forced to enroll at ASC)

The study of Berger & Milem, 2000emphasizes that college choice is not always a straightforward process of selecting the "best" option but is often constrained by individual circumstances and the available alternatives. Moreover, the findings of Paulsen, 1990highlights that students' choices are often influenced by a range of factors, including perceived options and constraints. Some students may end up at an institution not as their first choice but as a viable alternative. Hoxby & Avery, 2013 conducted studies on "undermatching" in higher education which focused on high-achieving, low-income students potentially not applying to selective institutions, a concept can be broadened to include students enrolling in institutions based on necessity rather than primary preference due to various constraints.

**4.2. Challenges Experienced by the Students while Staying at Apayao State College**.

**4.2.1. Pre-enrolment Guidance and Decision Making.**

The period preceding a student's formal enrollment in higher education is a critical juncture, laden with choices that can significantly shape their academic trajectory, personal growth, and future career prospects. It underscores the profound importance of equipping prospective students with the necessary information, support, and self-awareness to make informed choices about their academic programs. Neglecting this crucial phase can lead to misalignment, dissatisfaction, increased instances of shifting or transferring, and ultimately, a higher risk of attrition.

Respondent 6 said "*Dapat pag-isipang mabuti ang gustong kursong kukunin para maiwasan mag shift”* (Before enrolling, you should decide firmly your course preference to avoid shifting/transferring). Moreover, Respondent 3 said “*Sa 1st year pa lang, dapat pag-isipan mo na ang 1st choice, 2nd choice para hindi ka mahirapan sa course mo”* (On your 1st year, you should decide your preferred choice, so that you won’t get entangled at your course).

Effective pre-enrollment guidance serves as the bedrock upon which a student's positive higher education experience is built. As Super, 1957 career development theory posits, aligning educational choices with one's self-concept – understanding personal interests, values, and abilities – is fundamental for long-term career satisfaction and stability. Pre-enrollment is the prime opportunity for students to engage in self-reflection and explore how different academic programs resonate with their evolving identities and aspirations. Without this crucial step, students may gravitate towards programs based on superficial factors, peer influence, or familial expectations without a genuine understanding of the field or its alignment with their intrinsic motivations.

**Savickas, 2002** career construction theory suggests, a proactive approach to career development, starting with informed educational choices, empowers students to take ownership of their paths and reduces the chances of later course corrections driven by a lack of fit. By providing comprehensive information about different programs, career pathways, and the academic demands of each field, institutions like Apayao State College can empower students to make choices that are more congruent with their strengths and goals, thereby fostering greater commitment and persistence.

Robust career guidance and counseling programs, as advocated by Herr, Cramer, and Niles, 2004 are essential tools in facilitating effective pre-enrollment decision-making. These programs can encompass a range of activities, including career assessments, informational sessions, interactions with faculty and current students, job shadowing opportunities, and guidance on aligning personal skills and interests with academic options.

In the Philippine context, the Department of Education (DepEd) often provides career guidance materials for senior high school students. Leveraging and building upon these resources is crucial for Apayao State College to ensure a smooth transition for incoming students.

**4.2.2. Academic Preparedness and Progression.**

For many students in the region, the decision to pursue higher education at A. This underscores the critical importance of students entering higher education with the foundational knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to succeed, and the subsequent need for a well-structured academic pathway that facilitates their continuous growth and advancement. This is particularly salient for students transitioning to Apayao State College from diverse educational backgrounds within the Cordillera Administrative Region, where variations in prior learning experiences can be significant.

Respondent 2 said: “*Sa aking 2nd year, nabagsak ako sa isang subject na prerequisite sa susunod na subject kaya kumunti ang subject na naenroll ko, at alam ko na madedelay ang pag graduate ko kung mag stay pa ako sa kurso ko. May mga kaibigan akong nag shift, kaya nag shift na rin ako”.* (On my 2nd year, I failed in one subject which is prerequisite for a next subject, that’s why I got lesser subject and I know I will be extending my graduation if I stayed in my course. I got friends who already shifted, so I shifted as well).

Respondent 3 said: “*Hindi ako familiar sa ibang subject ko dahil GAS ako noong SHS ngunit Civil Engineering (STEM) ang kurso ko”* (I am not familiar on some of my subjects because I was GAS during my SHS but my course is Civil Engineering)

Respondent 4 said: *“HUMMS* *ang strand ko noong SHS pero enrolled ako sa Civil Engineering na nasa STEM kaya nahihirapan ako”* (My strand in SHS was HUMMS but I enrolled as Civil Engineering, a STEM)

As highlighted in the study of Glean, 2005, **academic preparedness,** often synonymous with college readiness, is a multifaceted concept extending beyond mere grades. It encompasses strong foundational skills in areas like reading comprehension, writing proficiency, and mathematics, alongside crucial non-cognitive skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, time management, and self-advocacy. Students who enter college academically prepared are more likely to engage actively with coursework, seek help when needed, manage their academic responsibilities effectively, and ultimately persist through their studies to graduation. Conversely, a lack of preparedness can lead to academic struggles, disengagement, lower grades, and an increased risk of dropping out.

The **cumulative nature of learning,** a principle emphasized by **Bloom, 1968** in his work on mastery learning and (**Wiley and Harnischfeger, 1974).** Foundational subjects often provide the essential building blocks for more advanced coursework. A weak understanding of prerequisite material can significantly hinder a student's ability to grasp subsequent concepts and succeed in higher-level courses. Therefore, ensuring students possess a solid foundation through successful completion of prerequisites is vital for their academic progression. Institutions like Apayao State College need to establish clear prerequisite requirements and effective mechanisms for assessing student mastery at each stage.

The K-12 curriculum in the Philippines, with its specialized Senior High School (SHS) strands, was designed to provide students with focused preparation for their intended career paths, including higher education. Research in the Philippines (Quintos et al., 2020); Religioso et al., 2022) has explored the alignment between SHS strands and college course enrollment, with findings indicating that misalignment can lead to academic challenges for students who lack the expected foundational knowledge. Ensuring a strong articulation between the SHS curriculum and the degree programs offered at Apayao State College is essential to maximize student preparedness and facilitate a smoother transition to tertiary education. This may involve curriculum mapping initiatives and clear communication of recommended SHS strands for specific college programs.

**4.2.3. Faculty Expertise and Quality.**

The quality of any higher education institution is inextricably linked to the expertise and caliber of its faculty. It underscores the fundamental importance of having knowledgeable, skilled, and dedicated educators who can effectively transmit knowledge, foster critical thinking, and inspire intellectual growth in their students.

Respondent 2 said “*Ang teacher naming ay guest lecturer kaya nahihirapan kami sa kanyang pagtuturo. May mga teacher na mahirap maunawaan ang pagtuturo”* (Our teacher is guest lecturer that’s why we find hard understanding his lectures. There are really teachers that hard to understand his teaching methods).

As highlighted by Shulman, 1986, effective teaching transcends mere content knowledge; it requires pedagogical content knowledge – the ability to transform subject matter into accessible and meaningful learning experiences for students. This expertise is built upon a strong foundation of subject matter mastery, coupled with an understanding of how students learn, common misconceptions, and effective teaching strategies. Faculty who are experts in their fields bring a depth of understanding and a passion for their subject that can significantly enrich the learning environment. They can provide nuanced explanations, connect concepts to real-world applications, and guide students towards a deeper appreciation of the discipline.

The expertise and quality of faculty have a direct and profound impact on student outcomes. Darling-Hammond's, 2000 extensive research consistently demonstrates a strong correlation between teacher quality and student achievement. Students taught by knowledgeable and skilled faculty tend to exhibit higher levels of academic performance, develop stronger critical thinking abilities, and are better prepared for future careers or advanced studies. Furthermore, faculty expertise contributes significantly to the credibility and reputation of an academic institution. A college with highly qualified and respected faculty attracts motivated students, fosters a culture of academic excellence, and enhances its standing within the broader academic community. This is vital for Apayao State College as it seeks to serve as a leading institution in the region.

**4.2.4. Policy Clarity and Consistency.**

The **policy clarity and consistency** in higher education underscores the fundamental need for transparent, well-defined, and uniformly applied institutional regulations, particularly concerning academic evaluation (grading systems) and student entry (admission policies). This is paramount for fostering a fair, equitable, and predictable learning environment at Apayao State College, contributing significantly to student success, trust in the institution, and overall academic integrity.

Ambiguity in policies, especially regarding grading, can lead to student anxiety, perceptions of unfairness, and even disputes. A **clear and unified grading system**, as the statement emphasizes, ensures that students understand how their performance will be evaluated across different courses and instructors. This transparency promotes a focus on learning rather than navigating a complex and potentially subjective assessment landscape. Similarly, **clear admission policies per program** ensure that prospective students understand the specific requirements for entry, promoting fairness and allowing them to adequately prepare.

Clear academic policies also play a vital role in supporting students' academic progression. When grading policies are transparent, students can better understand their academic standing and identify areas where they need to improve. Clear admission policies for specific programs ensure that students admitted possess the foundational knowledge and skills deemed necessary for success in that field, aligning with the theme of academic preparedness. Moreover, well-defined policies regarding academic standing, probation, and dismissal provide students with a clear understanding of the consequences of academic performance and the steps they need to take to remain in good standing.

**4.3. Factors Influencing the Students to Shift Courses and/or Transfer to Other Institution**.

**4.3.1. Financial Constraints.**

**Among the** main factors influencing the students’ decision to shift into other course and/or transfer to other learning institution points to financial difficulties. Students coming from remote areas were faced with expenses for their fare, allowances, payment for the boarding house, water, electricity and other miscellaneous expenses.

“*Maraming gastusin sa kurso ko, lalo na sa laboratory”* (My course has too many expenses, especially on Laboratory activities) says Respondent 1. Also, she said: “*Kulang ang perang pinapadala ng aking mga magulang kaya nag shift ako sa kursong di masyadong magastos”* (My parents send me not enough money that is why I shifted to other course).

Studies conducted by Alberto et al., 2016 suggest a link between students' socioeconomic backgrounds and their academic success. Financial difficulties can limit access to necessary resources, affecting their ability to study effectively. Also, classic attrition models (Tinto, 2012); DesJardins et al., 2002 highlight that financial constraints can hinder students' integration into the college environment and increase the likelihood of them leaving. And efforts to broaden access to higher education can be compromised if the financial needs of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are not adequately addressed (Callender & Jackson, 2005).

**4.3.2. Academic Difficulty and Performance.**

The pursuit of higher education inherently involves academic rigor, yet for some students, the challenges encountered within their chosen programs can become significant barriers to persistence. Academic difficulty, manifested through struggles with course content, poor performance, and subsequent failure in subjects, can lead students to reconsider their academic path. These can stem from the inherent difficulty of the course, inadequate prior preparation, or a mismatch between the student's background and the curriculum. Conversely, consistent struggles with coursework and failing grades can create a cycle of discouragement, ultimately leading students to explore alternative academic options or consider leaving the institution altogether.

“*Sadyang* *mahirap lang po kase ang kurso na iyon, may bagsak akong subjects kaya nag shift na ako”* (The course is just too hard and I got failing grades in some subject that is why I shifted to other course) says Respondent 4.

While Respondent 5 said *“Bumagsak ako sa ilang subject na prerequisite ng susunod na subject at di ko iyon maeenroll sa susunod na semester*" (I failed in some subjects which are prerequisite to the succeeding subjects which I cannot enroll in the succeeding semester)

Also, Respondent 1 says "*Hindi ako familiar sa ibang subjects dahil hindi aligned sa strand ko nung Senior High School ako”* (I was not familiar with some subjects because it was not aligned in the strand i chose during my Senior High School).

Academic adjustment is crucial in the first year. The transition to higher education involves significant academic adjustments, and difficulties in this area can lead to attrition (Yorke & Longden, 2008). In the study of Bean, 2005 students who are academically integrated and satisfied with their academic experiences are more likely to persist. Poor performance hinders this integration.

Also, research consistently shows a strong relationship between academic achievement and whether students continue their studies (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). And students with strong academic self-belief and effective study skills tend to perform better academically suggesting that a lack of alignment with prior learning (like SHS strands) can negatively impact this (Credé et al., 2010).

**4.3.3. Impact of External factors (COVID-19 and Connectivity.**

The unprecedented global health crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted all facets of life, and the education sector was no exception. The abrupt shift to remote learning presented unique challenges for students, particularly concerning the reliability and accessibility of internet connectivity. The lack of reliable internet connectivity during the pandemic created significant barriers to learning and fulfilling academic requirements.

For students at Apayao State College, these external factors likely played a significant role in their academic experiences, potentially influencing their performance, decisions to shift programs, or even their ability to continue their studies.

Respondent 5 said “*Noong panahon ng Covid 19, on-line at modular ang klase, kaso mahina ang internet sa amin kaya nahihirapan ako sa mga requirements sa aking subjects na naibagsak ko nung semester na iyon”* (During Covid-19, the internet connectivity in our place is too poor that is why I found the hard time in accomplishing some of the requirements in some of my subjects which I failed in the end of the semester)

In the study by Czerniewicz, L., et. al., 2020 while focused on Africa, discusses the exacerbation of existing inequalities, including access to technology and internet connectivity, during the pandemic, which is relevant to the Philippine context as well.

The study of Baticulon, R. E., et. al., 2021 directly addresses the challenges and effectiveness of remote teaching during the pandemic, likely touching upon issues of connectivity and student performance. The article written by Dhawan 2020discusses the rapid shift to online learning and highlights potential challenges, including access to technology and reliable internet, which directly impacted students' ability to engage with their studies.

The global report UNESCO 2019outlines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education systems worldwide, including the challenges faced by students in accessing learning resources and the potential for increased dropout rates due to these disruptions.

6. Conclusion

There were 3 themes identified based on the motivations to enroll: proximity and convenience, family/peer/guidance influence, circumstantial enrollment/lack of alternatives; 4 themes on challenges experienced by the students: pre-enrollment guidance and decision making, academic preparedness and progression, faculty expertise and quality, policy clarity and consistency; and 3 themes on factors influencing students to shift and/or transfer: financial constraints, academic difficulty and performance, and impact of external factors.

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