



## Correlating Reasons for Student Dropouts and Socioeconomic Factors at a State University from a Rural Province in the Philippines

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### Abstract

This descriptive-correlational study determined the students' reasons for dropping their studies, amid the newly implemented free tuition law in state universities and colleges. It also explored their relationship with the students' socioeconomic factors. Thirty-six (36) student dropouts from academic years 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 of the cohort state university in the rural province were chosen through systematic random sampling. Structured interviews using closed and open-ended questions were carried out through phone calls or direct messaging. Reasons for student dropouts that emerged are financial and economic, family and personal, academic, and engagement-related reasons. Test of correlation revealed that respondents' residence, gender, and family income are significantly related to their reasons for dropping. It can be concluded that despite the free tuition law, financial and economic factors remain the prevalent reason for dropping. Further, the more inaccessible the residence, the lower the family income, and being female, the more likely to drop out due to financial reasons and personal problems. Lastly, respondents suggested improving the institution's various student services, such as scholarships, admission, hostel, and guidance among others.

### Introduction

Dropout occurrence remains a perennial challenge to Higher Education Institutions (HEI). In many parts of the world, the high cost of education or financial constraint remains a major reason for college students to drop out from HEIs (Orion et al., 2014).

Related studies conducted in both developed and developing countries have pointed to financial constraints as one of the key factors for dropping out of college

education. Community colleges in the United States have reported low completion rates, especially among low-income students (Evans et al., 2020). In Germany, Scholten & Tieben (2017) found that many dropouts leave higher education to enter the labor market. A study in Turkey found that the majority of students decided to leave due to economic reasons, particularly the cost-of-living allowances (Can et al., 2017). Students in India, likewise, pointed at both family and financial factors as key contributors to dropping out of school (Irissappan &

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Ramganes, 2016). A study of college students in Ethiopia reported that, among others, family monthly income significantly affected students’ vulnerability to attrition (Eshetu et al., 2018). A distance learning institution in Pakistan reported unpaid tuition and financial obligations as the topmost reason for dropping out (Muslim et al., 2017). Furthermore, a study conducted at a university in Poland found that some dropouts enroll just to acquire the economic privileges of the student such as healthcare eligibility and various consumer discounts, without having the intention of gaining the degree (Zajac & Komendant-Brodowska, 2019).

A study conducted by the Philippine Institution for Development Studies pointed to poverty as the major cause of student dropouts in the Philippines. Poverty conditions such as large family sizes, lack of adult guidance, chronic hunger, and undernutrition, directly and indirectly, drive children and students away from school (David et al., 2018). In local HEIs, economic reasons remained the main contributor to college students’ attrition due to the high cost of tuition and miscellaneous fees. A study on private HEI in the countryside reported financial reasons as the main cause for dropping (Orion et al., 2014; Setosta, 2017). A prominent private HEI in Metro Manila also found financial problems and migration as the top reason to dropout among Pharmacy students (Roque et al., 2014).

Studies showed that the case of dropping is also prevalent not only in developing countries but also in developed countries. Among many factors, both developing and developed countries pointed to financial and economic as the prevalent reason for student dropouts. The prevalence of student dropouts is expectedly apparent in the Philippines, a developing country with 23.7% of the population living below the poverty line and a 2.5% unemployment rate in 2021 (Asian Development Bank, 2022).

The problem of sustainable access to higher education led the Philippine government to provide free tertiary or higher education for all Filipino students. In 2017, President Duterte signed the Republic Act 10931, or the Unified Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act (UAQTEA), which provides free tuition and other school fees in State Universities and Colleges (SUCs), local colleges, and state-run technical-vocational institutions (Congress of the Philippines, 2017). The law aimed to open doors to students from marginalized sectors,

particularly from low-income and poor families to pursue a college education. The SUCs and other state-run colleges implemented the said law from the academic year 2018-2019. Tuition and miscellaneous fees are free, regardless of students’ family economic status. The implementation of the free tuition law provided many students access to tertiary education and allowed students from low-income and poor families to pursue tertiary or college education.

In the case of Sorsogon State University-Bulan Campus, which is the cohort of the study, the free tuition did not manifest a considerable impact on the number of dropouts every semester and every academic year. Table 1 shows the number of dropouts before and during the implementation of the free tuition law (UAQTEA), which includes eight (8) semesters and four (4) academic years. Based on the report of the Registrar’s Office (2020), there was about 29% increase in enrollment during the first two years of the implementation of the free tuition, yet dropout rate decreased only by .5%.

**Table 1** Dropout frequency in Sorsogon State University-Bulan Campus before and during the implementation of the free tuition law

	Semester / Academic Year	n	%
<i>Before the implementation of the free tuition</i>	1 <sup>st</sup> Semester / A.Y. 2016-2017	46	13
	2 <sup>nd</sup> Semester / A.Y. 2016-2017	35	10
	1 <sup>st</sup> Semester / A.Y. 2017-2018	40	12
	2 <sup>nd</sup> Semester / A.Y. 2017-2018	40	12
<i>During the implementation of the free tuition</i>	1 <sup>st</sup> Semester / A.Y. 2018-2019	37	11
	2 <sup>nd</sup> Semester / A.Y. 2018-2019	42	12
	1 <sup>st</sup> Semester / A.Y. 2019-2020	66	19
	2 <sup>nd</sup> Semester / A.Y. 2019-2020	36	11

Sorsogon State University-Bulan Campus is located in a coastal municipality in the province of Sorsogon, where the study was carried out (Figure 1). The province of Sorsogon is situated in the southernmost part of Luzon Island, which is the largest of the Philippine archipelago. According to Philippine Statistics Authority (2018), areas in the Sorsogon province are generally rural and about 91% of the population is from rural areas. The majority of the students from the campus come from the municipality of Bulan, and the nearby towns, which are commonly rural areas.

This present study investigated the prevalent reasons for college student dropouts from rural areas, specifically the Sorsogon State University–Bulan Campus, despite the free tuition and waiving of other miscellaneous fees, as mandated by UAQTEA. Related literature have mentioned financial constraints or



Figure 1. Municipality of Bulan in the province of Sorsogon

economic situations as key reasons for students to drop out. However, literature, related to the reasons for the dropping of college students in the rural areas of the Philippines and in state universities and colleges, remains scarce. Furthermore, a lack of literature exists related to reasons for dropping after the implementation of the free tuition law (UAQTEA). Thus, this study explored the areas as mentioned above as well as the relationship between the various reasons for student dropouts to students' socioeconomic factors.

The study is anchored on the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, that is Quality Education, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable education for all (United Nations, n.d.). The results of the study provide Sorsogon State University–Bulan Campus with inputs for the improvement of measures and policies that could help in mitigating the prevalence of student dropouts. The results of the study can also contribute to extending and expanding data from the previous research related to college dropout factors, particularly after the UAQTEA implementation in state-owned universities in the country. Furthermore, the findings of this study can serve as references for future studies, such as the lived experiences of students undergoing financial and personal struggles during college.

## Objectives

This study was designed to determine the reasons that affect students' decision to drop out of college and their correlation with the students' socioeconomic factors.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions: (1) What are the prevalent reasons for students to drop out from their studies, despite the free tuition law? (2) Is there a relationship between the students' reasons for dropping out with their socioeconomic factors, such as sex, age, marital status, residence, and family income? (3) What can be suggested by students on how the institution can improve its services to mitigate the prevalence of student dropouts?

## Conceptual Framework

The study focused on determining the students' reasons for dropping out and explored their relationship with their socioeconomic factors. Figure 2 illustrates the key variables in this study, which are students' reasons for dropping out as the dependent variable and their socioeconomic factors as the independent variable. The study investigated the relationship between the said variables. Further, the study also drew suggestions from the respondents on how the institution can help in mitigating student dropout cases.

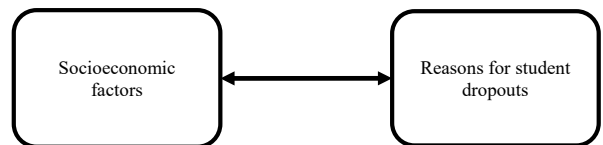


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework

## Research Methodology

This study determined the respondents' reason for dropping out and explored the relationship with respondents' socioeconomic factors. Hence, it employed a descriptive correlational design. The research locale was in the province of Sorsogon, where the cohort of the study, Sorsogon State University – Bulan Campus, is located. Sorsogon is a coastal province that lies on the southernmost tip of Luzon Island in the Philippines. It has a rich reserve of aquatic resources and is the major supplier of fish and marine products in the region (Philippine Statistics Authority, n.d.). It, however, ranked 75<sup>th</sup> out of 81 provinces in the competitiveness index and can be considered a high poverty province with poverty rating at 26.2% (Department of Trade & Industry, n.d.).

### 1. Population & Samples

From the total of 181 student dropouts reported by the Registrar's Office (2020), for the academic years, 2018-2019 and 2019-2020, thirty-six (36) respondents were chosen from the four semesters

through systematic random sampling. For every semester, nine (9) samples are systematically selected from the list of dropouts.

The sampling size was determined using a sampling size calculator by Select Statistical Services Ltd, which can apply to a small population. Using a 10% confidence interval, 90% confidence level, and a sample proportion of 20%, thirty-six (36) samples were recommended (Select Statistical Services, 2022). The student dropouts referred to in this study are those who formally and informally left Sorsogon State University - Bulan Campus and have been included in the report of dropouts by the Registrar's Office.

## 2. Research Instrument

A structured interview with both closed and open-ended questions was facilitated to gather data related to the study's research objectives. The socioeconomic factors of respondents were gathered at the onset of the interview such as age, sex, residence, marital status, and family monthly income. Plans of continuing their college education in the future was also asked.

Open-ended questions were then asked, which include the following: 1) Of all challenges and problems encountered during your stay in college, what is the ultimate reason that made you decide to drop out? and 2) what suggestions can you give to the university or campus administration to help and prevent students from dropping? On question 1, respondents only provided one response (what respondents considered as the ultimate reason for dropping). While on question 2, more than one was allowed (suggestions to prevent students from dropping out). The general weighted average of the students was not used as half of the respondents were not able to finish the semester and did not obtain semestral grades.

To validate the accuracy of interview questions, expert feedback was sought, and pilot interviews were performed. The aim of such strategy was to test the appropriateness of the questions and provide interviewers with comments and ideas of the study's viability (Majid et al., 2017). Furthermore, to validate the accuracy of data analysis, member checking was undertaken. Participants were contacted and presented with the results of the study. Seeking of participants feedback ensures the accuracy and credibility of findings and interpretation of interview responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## 3. Collection of Data

Data gathering took place during the third quarter of 2020 and this was at the height of the quarantine restriction imposed during Covid-19 pandemic. There were several challenges in contacting the randomly selected respondents as there were no face-to-face contacts. Virtual interviews were only held. From the dropout list provided by the Registrar's Office, which contained students' name, email, year in the program, and program name, other contact details were not provided due to data privacy. Selected respondents were contacted initially through email and/or through their Facebook messenger to obtain their agreement. Upon obtaining respondents' approval, they were then contacted over the phone or thru Facebook messenger and were interviewed according to their preference. Interview conversations were recorded and transcribed. After data analysis, respondents were again contacted to present the interview results as part of data validation.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed during data gathering. Respondents were informed about the objective of the study, sought their voluntary participation in the interview, and were informed of the confidentiality and anonymity of the information they shared.

## 4. Data analysis

The interview gathered both quantitative data (socioeconomic factors) and qualitative data (respondents' reasons for dropping out, and their suggestions to prevent students from dropping out). The qualitative responses from the open-ended questions went through Thematic analysis before they underwent quantitative analysis. The responses were initially coded. The various codes were grouped according to their deduced meaning and themes were generated. The generated themes were then reviewed and given names (Caulfield, 2022). The method of Thematic analysis is useful in deducing the meaning behind the words used by respondents (Dye, n.d.). The themes were then subjected to quantitative analysis—descriptive and inferential statistics.

The themes that emerged on the reasons for dropping and on suggestions provided by respondents were quantitatively analyzed using frequencies and percentages. Further, themes emerged on the reasons for dropping were also associated with the respondents' socioeconomic factors.

The relationship between the respondents' reasons for dropping out and their socioeconomic factors was tested using Cramer's V, a nonparametric tool used



to test the correlation of nominal-to-nominal variables. It is based on the chi-square measure of association (Polit & Beck, 2003). Cramer's V is used in this study as it correlated nominal variables, such as respondents' reasons for dropping out and their socioeconomic factors. Further, it can analyze cross-tables that are larger than 2x2 and with the observation of less than five (Van den Berg, 2020). The significance level of 5% was used in the analysis of the results. Obtained data were encoded and analyzed using SPSS v.27 (with license code 3Z57P98V2....3ZNFLEW#, expires on Jan 31, 2032).

## Results

### Socioeconomic profile of respondents

Table 2 shows the overall socioeconomic profile of respondents. Most respondents were female (61%), single (94%) and aged between 18-19 (50%). It can be also observed that majority of respondents' residences were hardly accessible (56%), which means that their residences were far from the campus, and they cannot afford to travel daily. These students were either living in remote villages within the municipality or outside of the municipality. Lastly, it can be observed that majority of respondents were coming from the low-income to poor families as their families' monthly income fall between PHP5,000.00 to 10,000 pesos per month (53%), which is less than USD200. Only fourteen percent (14%) were receiving more than PHP10,000.00 pesos and no one reported that their family monthly income was more than PHP25,000.00.

**Table 2.** Socioeconomic profile of the sample respondents

		<i>f</i>	%
Age	18-19	18	50
	20-21	9	25
	22-23	4	11
	24 above	5	14
Marital Status	Single	34	94
	Married/Lived-in	2	6
Sex	Male	14	39
	Female	22	61
	Accessible	9	25
Residence	Less Accessible	7	19
	Hardly accessible	20	56
Family monthly income	less than 5,000	12	33
	5,000 - 10,000	19	53
	10,000 - 25,000	5	14

### Respondents' reasons for dropping out.

Based on the various reasons for dropping out narrated by respondents, four (4) themes emerged, which

are financial & economic, personal & family, academic, and engagement. Table 3 illustrates the frequency and percentage of reasons for dropping out according to the themes that emerged.

**Table 3** Emerged themes and frequency of the respondents' reasons for dropping.

THEME	REASONS FOR DROPPING OUT	<i>F</i>	%
Financial & economic	Board & lodging expenses (n=15)	20	55
	School supplies/equipment expense (n=2)		
	The conflict between work & school (n=3)		
Personal & Family	Unwanted pregnancy (n=5)	10	28
	Conflict in the family (n=3)		
	Family migration (n=2)		
Academic	Don't like the program enrolled in (n=4)	5	14
	INC & failing grades (n=1)		
Engagement	Demotivated to enroll	1	3

Financial and economic. With a total of 55% of responses, it remained as the dominant reason for respondents' decision to drop out or leave school. This means that, despite the free tuition, which freed students from paying tuition and other fees, respondents were still unable to afford a college education. These respondents complained of expenses on food, travel, and boarding house rent (n=15). Others complained of their expense for school supplies/equipment (n=2), particularly for computer & internet needs. The majority of respondents were living remotely from the school campus which required them to take boarding houses as they were unable to afford to travel daily or often. Living in boarding houses required the respondents to obtain more living allowances than in their own homes.

Another economic reason for dropping out was the conflict between work and school (n=3). This was experienced by working students after they found it difficult to manage their work and academic demands. Most of these respondents came from low-income to poor families. Thus, their income contributes significantly to their family income. These working students were not professionals but were part-time laborers or domestic workers who needed to support their studies and augment their family income.

Personal & family. With a total of 28%, it was identified as another prevalent reason for dropping out of college education. Several respondents, who got into unwanted pregnancy (n=5) at an early age were unable to juggle motherhood and academic demands. Respondents expressed their experience of depression and confusion during that difficult time. Many of them expressed that the motherhood demands, aggravated by post-partum

issues and emotional instability, were too much to handle.

Conflict in the family (n=3) was also shared by several respondents as their reason for dropping out, and they expressed their sadness over the decision they made. Conflict in the family came in the form of misunderstanding with their family members which was either with their parents or guardians, and that aggravated the respondents' depression and despair. Further, it was also revealed that almost all these respondents did not seek guidance counselling nor share their ordeals with any authority in the school.

Migration (n=2) of the respondents' family to a distant residence from the campus left them with no option but to leave and drop their studies.

Academic. It can be noticed that academic-related reasons (14%) took a less significant proportion of the total number of responses. Respondents who disliked the program (n=4) they were enrolled in, took several responses. Many of them expressed that the program was not even their choice but was clueless why they landed on it. Some have attempted to shift to another course of their choice but were not allowed due to policy reasons. Most of them, nevertheless, were willing to stay if they could shift to the course of their choice.

Respondents also expressed their dissatisfaction over instructors and professors who were ineffective, inconsiderate, and unreasonable, but they never attributed such experience as their reason for dropping. On the other hand, only one reported that he dropped due to failing grade (n=1).

Engagement. A lone respondent answered that she was demotivated (n=1) to pursue her studies. It means such a response is an isolated one and less significant than the total responses. Many respondents remained engaged in their academic pursuits, and only external circumstances pushed them to leave their college education.

**Correlation of respondents' socioeconomic factors with their reason for dropping**

Table 4 illustrates the test of correlation performed on the respondents' reasons for dropping towards their socio-economic factors, such as the respondents' age, marital status, sex, residents, and family income. To ascertain the relationship between the mentioned categorical variables, Cramer's V test was conducted. The nominal correlation of the variables were found specifically on sex ( $V(3,36)=0.547, p=0.013$ ), residence ( $V(6,36)=0.461, p=0.018$ ) and family income

( $V(6,36)=0.481, p=0.011$ )) as they displayed significant relationship with the reason for dropping. It can be also observed that they all displayed a moderate degree of association.

**Table 4.** Correlation of respondents' reasons for dropping out with their socio-economic factors

		Financial & economic	Personal & Family	Academic	Engagement	V	P*
Age	18-19	9	6	2	1	0.263	0.588
	20-21	6	1	2	0		
	22-23	3	0	1	0		
	23 above	2	3	0	0		
Marital Status	Single	20	8	5	1	0.391	1.38
	Married/Lived-in	0	2	0	0		
Sex*	Male	12	0	2	0	0.547	0.013
	Female	8	10	3	1		
Residence*	Accessible	1	4	4	0	0.461	0.018
	Less Accessible	5	1	1	0		
	Hardly accessible	14	5	0	1		
Family Income*	less than 5,000	12	0	0	0	0.481	0.011
	5,000 - 10,000	7	8	3	1		
	10,000 - 25,000	1	2	2	0		

\*Significant at > 0.05

As financial and economic is the prevailing reason for dropping, a significant relationship was, then, found in the family income. Thus, those with lower family incomes were more likely to experience financial and economic problems than those with higher family incomes. Dropouts were generally coming from families with a very low income.

Another significant relationship was found in the accessibility of residence. Accessible residence means that respondents' address is within the *población* (central district or downtown) of the municipality and very accessible for daily travel; less accessible means that their address is outside the *población*, although in the adjacent residential districts or villages and still affordable to travel daily; hardly accessible means that their address is far from the campus, and they cannot afford to travel daily.

Sex was also found to have a significant relationship with the reason for dropping out. This association was due to the personal problems experienced more by the females. Females were the ones who reported conflict in the family and unwanted pregnancies. Pregnancy as the reason for dropping displayed several cases. Thus, it implies that students who became pregnant found it difficult to continue their stay in college and cope with the situation. This goes with those students who experienced conflict in the family. With emotional

problems they needed to address, they found it difficult to continue and chose to sacrifice their studies. Furthermore, none of these students reported their cases or shared their emotional struggles with the guidance office or with an authority on the campus.

Other factors such as age and marital status did not show significant relationship with the reason for dropping. This result did not find similarity to the study conducted in a private college in the southern Philippines, where it found age as the major factor of students dropping out of school. They were found to become factors due to growing pressure on economic productivity and family life (Orion et al., 2014) The respondents in this study were generally within the age of college education (M=20 yrs old) with only two (2) respondents who were over 23 years old.

### **Suggestions offered by respondents to the institution to prevent students from dropping out.**

Table 5 enumerates the suggestions provided by respondents that the university administration can consider as part of its improvement process. From the various suggestions provided by respondents, five (5) themes emerged, such as improvement of scholarship/assistance programs, improvement of guidance service, improvement of teaching effectiveness, improvement of admission services, and improvement of the class schedule.

**Table 5** Suggestions offered by respondents to help and prevent students from dropping out

THEME	SUGGESTIONS PROVIDED BY RESPONDENTS	n	%
Improvement of scholarship services	Provide additional scholarship/assistance to students (n=6)	15	37
	Scrutinize the selection of scholars (n=5)		
	Wide & effective promotion of scholarship offers (n=3)		
	Timely salary of student assistants (n=1)		
Improvement of guidance services	Encourage students to persevere (n=4)	10	24
	Counsel students undergoing stress/problems (n=4)		
	Contact students who are unable to report to class (n=2)		
Improvement of teaching effectiveness	Support & understanding from teachers (n=7)	9	22
	Provide remote/online learning methodologies (n=2)		
Improvement of admission services	Add more programs, particularly education program (n=2)	4	10
	Allow students to shift to their desired program (n=1)		
	Must follow the program choices of the students (n=1)		
Improvement of class schedule	Manageable schedule for working students & single parent	3	7

Improvement of scholarship services. Despite the free tuition and miscellaneous fees, which is already a form of a scholarship grant to students in state-owned universities and colleges, respondents stressed that additional scholarships and assistance must be provided and offered to the students (n=6) and must be promoted extensively by the college (n=3) and its selection process must be efficient (n=5). This means that respondents desire or need more scholarship grants, particularly financial assistance to assist them with their school and boarding expenses. As the majority of respondents came from low-income to poor families, waiving tuition and school fees is not enough for them to survive the entire cost of college education.

Improvement of guidance services. Improvement of guidance program and monitoring of students was suggested commonly by respondents who encountered personal and family problems as well as those who experienced academic-related problems. Respondents suggested that students should be encouraged to persevere (n=10), should be counseled when undergoing stress/problems (n=4), and should be contacted when having problems reporting to class (n=2). They, particularly those who experienced conflict in the family and had unwanted pregnancies, expressed that they could have made a better decision when counseled professionally and monitored appropriately. Some respondents observed that the guidance services of the school are not functional and inaccessible.

Respondents who dropped out due to disliking the study program they had enrolled in, also mentioned the significance of the guidance services in their ordeal. According to them, a guidance counselor can help them in their course choice and help them discover the practical decision they can make.

Improvement of teaching effectiveness. Some respondents complained of instructors and professors being inconsiderate of their plight and learning challenges. Thus, improvement of teaching effectiveness was also highly suggested. They specifically suggested that teachers and professors must be supportive and understanding (n=7) and must provide remote/online teaching methodologies (n=2). Many respondents expressed that some instructors and professors demand a lot from students, despite their ineffectiveness in their teaching strategies. Also, the working students and student mothers recommended that alternative learning strategies be used, such as online and modular teaching.

Improvement of admission services. Respondents, specifically those who disliked the course they were enrolled in, suggested improving the admission services. They suggested that more courses such as education must be offered on campus (n=2) and that they should be enrolled in the chosen course (n=1) and be allowed to shift courses (n=1). These respondents expressed that they understood that there were policies that admission services follow. However, they said that it should be explained to them, or they should be given increased details. It can be observed through this suggestion the significance of the guidance services in providing counsel to the students. They could have been guided on what to expect and what's their best option.

Improvement of class scheduling. Respondents who are working and taking care of their infants suggested the improvement of the class schedule. They recommended that they should have a manageable schedule (n=3, 7%) where they don't need to sacrifice their jobs or their time with their child. Thus, respondents want the institution to improve the class scheduling system. This suggestion is related to the offering of online/remote teaching methodologies. Working mothers suggest the improvement of class scheduling and the offering of online/remote teaching methodologies.

## Discussion

This study determined the respondents' reasons for dropping out of college and explored its relationship with their socioeconomic factors. It also gathered suggestions from the respondents on how the institution could mitigate dropout cases.

Despite the implementation of the free tuition law, narratives of the respondents remain pointed at financial and economic aspects as the major reason for dropping. It implies that living allowance is a significant requirement for pursuing tertiary education and it is as substantial as the tuition and school fees. While expenses are mostly weighed on tuition and fees, the expenses for living cost allowances account for more than half of the total cost of attending college (Kelchen et al, 2017).

Several respondents also expressed the difficulty of attending classes without owning a laptop or desktop computer and with slow internet connectivity. These respondents were enrolled in the Information Technology program. Thus, it was intolerable for them to take such program without the much-needed equipment.

The various expenses of students related to school and boarding must be understood as a key factor and must be heavily considered along with tuition fees. The cost of food, transportation, boarding rentals, and school supplies are more volatile and can outweigh the tuition and other school-miscellaneous fees. A study conducted in Kenya also found that travel and boarding cost is correlated with school dropout and are found to become a barrier to education (Mutege, 2017).

The above finding explains why there is a significant correlation between reasons for dropping out and family income. The lower the means to subsidize living costs, the higher the likelihood of dropping out from studies. Results showed that poor families or families with very low income would still find it difficult to send their students to college. A local study also found that students, who were coming from poor to very poor families and earn less than Php 10,000.00, are most likely to decide not to pursue studies (Albert et al., 2018). Respondents expressed that their families do not have a stable source of income and their parents are casual laborers and agricultural workers. Their family income, which comes usually on a daily or weekly basis, is primarily spent on food consumption. Thus, school-related expenditures became secondary.

The study also found the importance of a curriculum or a program that accommodates working students. Respondents expressed the necessity to earn an income was more pressing, the opportunity cost of academic pursuit was sacrificed in the end. The institution at present only caters to students with resident status and has no programs offered for virtual or working students. A study conducted in UAE found that work-education conflict is one of the most influential factors in dropping out of university (Ashour, 2019). A study in Germany also found that working students are at high risk of dropping and the longer the work time per week, the higher risk it poses (Hovdhaugen, 2015). However, as compared to working students from developed or well-off countries, employment for working students in rural areas is mostly for domestic help and non-skilled labor, which are extremely low-paying employment. Thus, it requires more work time to get a relatively substantial wage.

Results also showed the relationship between reasons for dropping out and access to residence. It can be observed that the more inaccessible the residence is, the higher the likelihood of dropping. Those living considerably distant from the campus were more likely



to experience financial struggles than those with accessible residence. Respondents, who were living in remote villages and neighboring towns, were unable to and could not afford to travel daily. Thus, they were left with a boarding house option. Living in a boarding house is more costly than living at home, which includes daily food consumption, boarding house rent, and travel expenses. In South African townships, key factors of students' dropout include the distance of students from school (Saulo, 2019).

The study also revealed some gender issues with the reason for dropping out. It was observed that a few female students had unwanted pregnancies and experienced conflict with the family. Respondents who dropped due to unwanted pregnancies were also left with no choice but to drop as they could not handle the burden of going to school and the challenges of motherhood. Respondents who went through unwanted pregnancies expressed that they remain eager to pursue studies if only circumstances would allow them. As mentioned, it would be beneficial that the institution would have a program, or a curriculum designed for working students as it would be also valuable for student-mothers.

Generally, it can be observed that academic reasons did not relatively show a significant effect. The result may differ from a local study conducted in one higher education university, where the inability to meet scholastic requirements is one of the predominant reasons (Orong, et al., 2020). However, that study was conducted in a private university from an urban area. It is evident that students from the cohort university are from rural areas, who mostly come from low-income families. It has been observed that many well-off families prefer to send their children to a university in the city or the metropolis, having better facilities and prominence.

Finally, this study attempted to gather suggestions from respondents on how the institution can improve its service and mitigate dropout cases. Most respondents expressed the need for more scholarships and financial assistance programs, particularly for deserving students. On top of the free tuition, respondents appeal that those who need more resources to pursue tertiary education should be afforded more. It can be observed from the results, that free tuition is not enough to send poor students to tertiary education. The family income of respondents can only manage to provide for basic needs such as their daily meals, and school expenses are of secondary importance, for those respondents who take casual jobs or earn from part-time work to fund their

schooling found themselves in a very difficult position. When they must choose between work and schooling, they have no choice but to leave their studies.

There are, however, a few scholarship grants that are offered by both private entities and government agencies. In the municipality, there are private organizations, cooperatives, and individuals that offer scholarship grants. Government agencies, other than the Commission on Higher Education, also regularly offer scholarship grants, such as the Department of Science and Technology (DOST), the Government System Insurance System (GSIS), and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration, among others. The problem, however, is that most respondents were not aware of the available scholarship programs and most respondents were not under any additional scholarship grants, other than the free tuition that came with their enrollment. Some, however, expressed that they were being financially supported by their relatives.

The large majority of respondents are not aware of the other programs under the Republic Act 10931, which are the Tertiary Education Subsidy (TES) and the Student Loan Programs (SLP) (Commission on Higher Education, n.a.). These programs are also offered by the Commission of Higher Education to augment the benefits of free higher education by providing education expense subsidies and loans. TES is currently offered in the university with a limited number of grantees. Thus, many of the respondents felt that there are more deserving grantees who are not given the opportunity. Respondents felt that the selection process needs more improvement and needs to be promoted extensively. A study conducted in South African universities found that among other factors, lack of communication of scholarship also experienced by students contributed to their reason for dropping out (Mabuza, 2020). Respondents felt that the scholarship office should be active in promoting other available scholarship offers. The implication of this suggestion appeals to the scholarship office of the institution, to be more proactive and dynamic in offering and promoting the scholarship programs or other financial assistance programs available.

In terms of improving guidance services, respondents believed that it can significantly help in preventing students from dropping. Results revealed that respondents who experience conflict with the family, struggle with motherhood, and dislike their program, were not counselled or given the needed advice in order

for them to make the right decision. Most respondents expressed that they did not seek counselling in the midst of their ordeals. A study conducted in Kenya on the influence of counselling found that cases of dropout were very high as counselors rarely adopt both peer and group counselling (Ngure, 2019). On campus, respondents observed the unavailability of a guidance counselor, which is going on for a few academic years. Thus, the office had become less functional and frequently closed.

Most suggestions offered by the respondents were associated or sprang from their reasons for dropping out. Improvement of teaching effectiveness, however, is the suggestion that was not identified as one of the reasons for dropping. Several respondents mentioned that academic pressures from inconsiderate and ineffective instructors also made their stay at the university challenging. But they cannot directly attribute it as the key reason for dropping. They can be merely considered as an aggravating factor in their decision.

When respondents were asked about their plan after they dropped, half of them expressed interest in taking full-time or casual jobs. Those who experienced unwanted pregnancy chose to take care of their child and those who disliked the program they enrolled in wanted to transfer school. Nevertheless, 34 out of 36 (94%) respondents are hoping to continue their studies if and once they are able. This means that a huge majority of these dropouts remained engaged in pursuing their studies, but these external factors, particularly financial & economic and personal & family, have deterred them from their pursuit. Furthermore, it can be concluded that dropouts are commonly pushed by circumstances to leave or set aside their college education, and not significantly due to their own volition or academic underperformance.

### Suggestions

Considering the findings, the study recommends the widest promotion of scholarship programs available and streamlining of the selection process of grantees. The study recommends the proactive efforts of the scholarship office in improving its services. Offering free hostel services, including board & lodging, to deserving grantees should be also considered. It also recommends the reopening of the guidance office and making its services functional and active, as it deters potential dropouts due to personal and family, academic, and engagement reasons. The possibility of institutionalizing blended learning and virtual learning strategies must be

explored to accommodate working students and student parents.

The study recommends further research on the topic by providing an in-depth narrative or the lived experiences of poor students, working students, and student-mothers from the rural areas of their college education ordeals.

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