

A scoping review of stress among college students: With implications for student support programs

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Abstract

The complex landscape of higher education exposes undergraduate students to academic, financial, and socio-emotional stressors that can significantly affect their mental health and academic success. In the Philippines, localized research addressing student distress remains highly fragmented across single institution and specific disciplines. This scoping review systematically maps the existing literature on stress among university students in the Philippines to identify specific stressors, prevalence, risk factors, and coping mechanisms, ultimately informing the development of localized student support programs. Following the framework by Arksey & O'Malley and the PRISMA-ScR reporting guidelines, a systematic search was conducted across Scopus, PubMed, and APA PsychInfo databases. Literature published between 2019 and 2025 which were empirical, open-access, and full-text studies of Filipino undergraduates were screened. Out of 1472 articles, 16 were included in the study. The results showed that academic demands, heavy workloads, and a sudden shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic emerged as the primary stressors. Heightened stress susceptibility was significantly associated with demographics such as female sex, younger age, and lower academic year levels, as well as personal traits like low resilience, and perfectionism. Students employed both adaptive strategies (e.g., peer support, religious coping), and maladaptive behaviors (e.g., avoidance, and substance-use). Only one structural intervention was identified. The findings highlight a critical gap in evaluated institutional interventions. There is an urgent need for higher education institutions in the Philippines to design integrated, target-specific mental health services, and cultivate adaptive coping mechanisms to bolster student resilience.

Keywords: academic stress, college students, coping mechanisms, scoping review, Philippines

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1. Introduction

The complexity of college life exposes students to a range of stressors which includes academic demands, financial burdens, and social-emotional challenges (Chemagosi & Barongo, 2024). These stressors, if left unaddressed, can compromise both short-term academic success and long-term mental health. Notably, stress is particularly prevalent among undergraduate students, who report higher levels of distress and academic disruption compared to their graduate counterparts (Wyatt & Oswald, 2013). Chronic exposure to stress has been linked to the rising incidence of mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression among college students which can further impair academic engagement, interpersonal relationship, and long-term life satisfaction (Ashipala & Albanus, 2024; Otieno, 2025) leading to a loss of motivation and struggle to engage in academic activities. Furthermore, the impacts of stress are not experienced equally across all student demographics. Academic stress has been found to be significantly associated with reduced psychological wellbeing with women and non-binary students reporting higher levels of distress compared to men (Barbayannis et al., 2022), being exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic showing the disparities, intensifying academic pressure, and exposing systemic gaps in student mental health support. In addition to this, financial stress disproportionately burdens low-income and first-generation college students, who often must balance employment with their school work to meet rising tuition and housing costs (Dissen & Tome, 2024; Mentzer, 2025; Yeboah, 2026).

Stress has been widely documented as a factor which influences students' mental health and academic outcomes across diverse educational contexts. Various studies show how academic, financial, and socio-emotional stress affect mental health. The literature would suggest that persistent academic pressures are associated with difficulties such as anxiety, depression, and overall poor wellbeing (Pasco et al., 2020; Slykerman & Mitchell, 2021). Specifically, self-inflicted stress driven by personal expectations and self-imposed academic pressure has been identified as the most significant predictor of languishing mental health among undergraduates (Cordova Olivera et al., 2023), though resilience can act as a protective buffer against these harmful effects (Chen, 2024). Financial strain has been shown to act as a constant burden, negatively impacting cognitive functioning, and as well as redirecting attention towards immediate survival concerns thus impairing executive functioning (Chakraborty et al., 2025; Royer et al., 2021). Furthermore, socio-emotional stress such as the transition to university life, homesickness, and peer relationships exerts a significant amount of stress with lower year students such as first years to be more vulnerable (Ferrara, 2020; Mastrokourou et al., 2024).

Given these challenges, support systems and interventions play a critical role in addressing the detrimental effects of stress on the mental health of college students. Social support, in particular, has been consistently identified as a buffer against stress, with students who report stronger support networks showing more favorable mental health and academic outcomes (Feldman et al., 2008). However, access to these supports is often uneven. Gender-based differences in perceived support, as well as broader institutional barriers such as stigma, limited mental health literacy, and insufficient access to trained professionals, contribute to students' reluctance or inability to seek help (Agyapong et al., 2022; Ashipala & Albanus, 2024). Schools must not only recognize the multidimensional stressors students face, but also actively implement systems that foster resilience and psychological wellbeing (Chemagosi & Barongo, 2024).

Digital and self-guided interventions offer promising solutions to address these systemic gaps. Web-based programs have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing psychological distress and promoting healthier coping strategies, even among students with elevated stress levels (Stallman et al., 2019). Mobile-based initiatives also illustrate how technology can be used to improve mental health literacy and expand access to support using familiar communication platforms like text and email (Agyapong et al., 2022). Moreover, meta-analytic evidence suggests

that self-guided stress management interventions can produce small but significant improvements in reducing stress, anxiety, and depression, particularly among highly stressed student populations (Amanvermez et al., 2022). Despite the increasing prevalence of mental health concerns among college students, many remain hesitant to access available support services due to a range of persistent barriers. Stigma surrounding mental health continues to be a primary deterrent, particularly in cultures or communities where psychological difficulties are perceived as personal weaknesses rather than legitimate health concerns (Ashipala & Albanus, 2024; Veerer & Blakemore, 2006).

2. Methodology

This scoping review was conducted based on the scoping study framework developed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005). It followed five stages: (1) identifying the research question, (2) identifying relevant studies, (3) study selection, (4) charting the data, and (5) collating, summarizing, and reporting the results. The reporting of the results followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021).

Stage 1: Identifying the Research Questions

The review aimed to explore existing literature regarding stress on university students in the Philippines. Specifically, it aimed to answer the following questions: (1) What are the stressors encountered by university students in the Philippines? (2) What is the prevalence and impact of stress on this population? (3) What are the predictors and risk factors of stress in this population? (4) What are the coping strategies that this population applies? (5) What are the existing mental health interventions and services for this population, and how can identified gaps be addressed?

Stage 2: Identifying Relevant Studies

The study included literature retrieved from reputable databases, namely: Scopus, PubMed, and APA PsycInfo. Advanced and deep searches in these databases were conducted to capture literature with relevant terms in their title, keywords, and abstracts ("university students" OR "college students" OR "higher education students") AND ("stress" OR "academic stress" OR "psychological stress") AND ("stressors" OR "risk factors" OR "predictors" OR "intervention" OR "coping strategies" OR "mental health services") AND ("Philippines"). For literature to be included must have involved a sample of higher education students from universities in the Philippines. It should have focused on the academic and/ or psychological stress encountered as well as different aspects of this stress. Studies may have included the description of interventions, support programs, or coping strategies specifically aimed at, or mitigating academic and/ or psychological stress. Moreover, the literature should have been empirical open-access journal articles available in full-text online, published between January 2019 and July 2025, and written in English. Studies excluded were those that did not prioritize focus on higher education student populations as well as those that have different focus for stress (e.g. purely financial stress, purely physical stress). Literature that were not journal articles published within the aforementioned databases, are secondary research or grey literature, and are not available through open-access were also excluded.

Stage 3: Study Selection

The titles and abstracts of the articles included in the database search were screened according to the inclusion criteria. Duplicates were also removed. Afterwards, the full-text articles were downloaded for further screening. Any articles not fitting the inclusion criteria, or fit the exclusion criteria were excluded. The final list of articles meeting both the inclusion and exclusion criteria were utilized in data analysis.

Stage 4: Charting the Data

Basic information on the articles were extracted such as title, authors, and year of publication. Information on the constructs and methodologies that aid in answering the research questions will also be charted. These include

the research design, sample size, participant demographics, stressors, predictors or risk factors for stress, coping strategies, and interventions or services employed. All of these were encoded into a data chart for synthesis.

Data Management Plan - All extracted data from the studies were systematically organized and stored using a secure, digital repository (e.g. cloud storage or institutional databases), and they will only be accessible to the authors of this paper. Data included study characteristics (e.g. title, author, year, region), key findings related to types of stressors, prevalence, impacts, coping mechanisms, and descriptions of intervention or support programs. MS Excel will be the primary tool for data extraction and organization. In accordance with institutional policy, the data extracted will be retained for a period of 5 years from the study's completion. After this, it will be disposed of properly through deletion of the relevant files from all digital repositories.

Step 5: Collating, Summarizing, and Reporting the Results

The synthesized results were evaluated through deductive thematic analysis, following the review's guiding research questions. Utilizing the PRISMA-ScR model, this allowed the findings of the 16 included studies to be synthesized into distinct conceptual categories representing the stress profile of undergraduates in the Philippines.

PRISMA-ScR - The process for selecting literature to be included will be reported through the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram. The common characteristics of these literature will be charted and presented in tabular form. This should provide a surface-level summary of the trends in the data gathered.

3. Results and Discussion

The findings of this scoping review, synthesized from 16 included studies, provides a map of the stress experiences, predictors, and management strategies among university students in the Philippines. As shown in figure 1, 1472 articles were initially identified. After removing six duplicates and accounting for three unretrievable reports, the remaining titles and abstracts were screened. As such, this process resulted in 31 texts undergoing full-text review. Ultimately, 16 studies met the inclusion criteria and were incorporated into the final synthesis.

Figure 1
PRISMA Flow Diagram for the Scoping Review

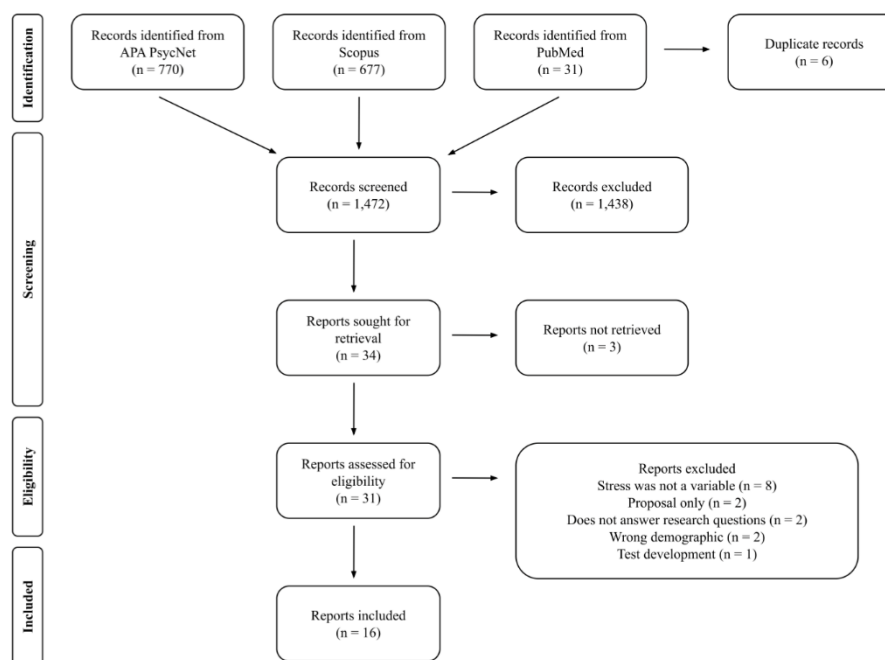


Table 1
Information on Included Studies

Author	Year	Research Design	Sample Size	Participant Demographics	Stress-Related Information
Acob et al.	2021	Cross-Sectional	311	Tertiary students from private and public HEIs in Leyte	Stressors: abrupt adjustment to online learning systems leading to academic disruption during COVID-19 Predictors/ Risk Factors: Younger age (≤ 20 years).
Balberan & Bengwasan	2024	Cross-Sectional	220	Filipino college students ages 18-25 from universities in the Northern Philippines. Completed at least one semester during the COVID-19 pandemic Used Facebook for at least 2 years	Coping Strategies: Social media use, particularly, Facebook as an emotion-focused coping mechanism to manage pandemic-related academic and psychosocial stress.
Berdida & Grande	2023	Cross-Sectional	611	Nursing students from two Philippine government universities enrolled in the research settings during the second semester of 2020–2021	Predictors/ Risk Factors: Low quality of life and low psychological resilience was associated with higher levels of perceived stress.
Bersamin	2023	Quasi-Experimental	57	Senior college students from a male-dominated academic program in a private college in Mindanao	Intervention: Stress Inoculation Training (SIT) as a structured intervention to reduce perceived stress among college students
Cleofas & Rocha	2021	Cross-Sectional; Correlational	952	Filipino undergraduate students	Stressors: Disease and COVID-19 related health concerns, and an abrupt shift to online learning.
Dacawe	2023	Cross-Sectional	318	Enrolled in BSc Pharmacy at SLU Baguio taking 18 units	Stressors: Highly demanding academic workload leading to studies-related burnout.
Del Castillo et al.	2023	Qualitative study using open-ended questionnaires	43	Filipino Christian college students	Stressors: Situational stressors (general life circumstances and events)
Falguera et al.	2023	Cross-sectional	261	1st-4th year BS Nursing students in Central Philippines enrolled in recognized CHED universities during May-July 2020	Predictor/ Risk Factors: COVID-19 related anxiety significantly contributes to stress and psychological wellbeing.
Jaca et al.	2024	Descriptive	565	Undergraduate students from Cebu Technological University enrolled during 2021-2022	Coping Strategies: Self-regulation, peer-support, and time management practices
Labrague	2021	Cross-Sectional	301	Student Nurses in the Philippines	Stressors: COVID-19 health threats and abrupt shift to online learning
Labrague	2022	Cross-sectional	261	Nursing college students in Central Philippines	Coping Strategies: Use of problem-focused coping (seeking support, consultation, resilience building) and emotion-focused coping (social media use for information, emotional eating, and alcohol use)
Miranda & Tolentino	2023	Cross-Sectional	3718	University students from a state university in Pampanga	Predictors/ Risk Factors: Female sex and lower academic year level was associated with higher stress and vulnerability.
Ridad et al.	2024	Descriptive Correlational	191	Junior and senior nursing students from a private and public institution in Iligan City	Stressor: External stressors (clinical-instructor causing distress through scolding and high expectations), and Intrapersonal stressors (skills confusion, fear of clinical area, and knowledge insufficiency).
Roxas	2023	Phenomenological	11	University students from NCR	Stressors: Lock-down related disruptions to physical learning spaces. Coping Strategies: Boundary-setting between academic and home life, routine reconstruction, creative self-care, and digital co-presence with others, plants, and pets
Tan et al.	2025	Multi-study design Study 1: Cross-Sectional Study 2: Longitudinal	Study 1: 294 Study 2: 324	Filipino university students	Predictors/ Risk Factors: Socially prescribed perfectionism was a significant positive predictor of perceived stress. It further acted as an aggravating factor to psychological distress. It was further associated with poorer well-being and unhealthy coping. Coping: Adaptive coping such as active coping, humor, and positive cognitive restructuring was utilized. It must be noted that maladaptive coping such as avoidance, and substance use were noted.
Tibus & Ledesma	2021	Descriptive Exploratory	250	College students	Stressors: Personal stress, classroom stress, performance stress, and time-management stress.

Multidimensional Sources and Domains of Undergraduates - Because several of the studies in this review were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, related stressors were the most common to emerge. With the declaration of Enhanced Community Quarantine in March 2020, the lockdown forced schools and universities to

suddenly implement emergency protocols and changes to learning that many were not entirely prepared for (Alvarez, 2020; Baniago et al., 2025). During this period, students experienced depression, anxiety, and stress both due to the virus itself and because of its consequences in disrupting “normal” life (Acob et al., 2021; Cleofas & Rocha, 2021; Labrague, 2021).

Academic demands were the most frequently reported sources of stress. These included heavy academic workload, performance expectations, time-management difficulties, and burnout associated with demanding curricula. Pharmacy and nursing students in particular reported high levels of academic strain due to intensive coursework and clinical requirements (Dacawe, 2023; Ridad et al., 2024). More broadly, students across disciplines experienced classroom, performance, and time-management stress (Tibus & Ledesma 2021). Abrupt transitions to online learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic also intensified academic stress. This led to academic disruptions, difficulty in adjusting to digital platforms, and challenges in maintaining learning continuity (Acob et al., 2021; Cleofas & Rocha, 2021; Labrague, 2021). Health-related anxiety, particularly the fear of COVID-19 infections and concerns for family wellbeing were prominent concerns. Students perceived that the pandemic was a direct threat to their physical and psychological safety, which compounded existing academic stressors (Cleofas & Rocha 2021; Labrague, 2021). COVID-19 related anxiety was also found to significantly contribute to elevated stress levels and poorer psychological wellbeing among nursing students (Falguera et al., 2023).

Situational and life-context stressors were also commonly reported. These included lockdown-related disruptions to physical learning environments, blurred boundaries between academic and home life, and social isolation (Roxas, 2023). Qualitative findings further highlighted situational stressors rooted in broader life circumstances and unexpected events (Del Castillo et al., 2023). Among nursing students, external interpersonal stressors such as distress caused by instructors scolding and high expectations were salient, alongside this, intrapersonal stressors such as fear of clinical environments, confusion regarding skills, and perceived knowledge efficiency were also observed. Lastly, limited access to resources significantly exacerbated stress. Students from lower-income households and those lacking personal computing devices or stable internet access were at increased risk of stress and anxiety during online learning periods (Cleofas & Rocha, 2021).

Impact and Prevalence of Stress - Although not all studies quantified stress prevalence, available evidence indicates that stress was consistently reported as a common and significant concern among Filipino university students across large samples, with some exceeding 900 to 3700 participants (Cleofas & Rocha, 2021; Miranda & Tolentino, 2023). Stress had substantial negative consequences on students’ psychological and academic functioning. In particular, high levels of stress were associated with poorer psychological wellbeing and increased anxiety (Falguera et al., 2023; Cleofas & Rocha, 2021), reduced quality of life and diminished resilience (Berdida & Grande, 2023), and heightened vulnerability to psychological distress during the pandemic (Tan et al., 2025). These highlight and suggest that stress is not only prevalent, but also undermines students’ mental health, adaptive capacity, and overall university experience.

Predictors and Risk Factors for Stress - Younger students, particularly those under 20 years of age were more vulnerable to higher levels of stress (Acob et al., 2021). Female students and those from lower academic year levels (e.g., freshmen & sophomores) consistently exhibited greater stress and vulnerability compared to their counterparts (Cleofas & Rocha, 2021; Miranda & Tolentino, 2023). Low resilience and poor quality of life were also strong predictors of elevated perceived stress (Berdida & Grande, 2023; Labrague, 2021). Socially prescribed perfectionism also emerged as a significant personality-based risk factor, positively predicting stress and aggravating psychological distress, while being linked to poorer well-being and unhealthy coping patterns. Lastly, economic factors such as limited access to digital resources, and unstable internet connectivity was observed to increase students’ stress risk, particularly during remote learning (Cleofas & Rocha, 2021). Pandemic-specific anxiety was also identified to further intensify stress levels across student populations (Falguera et al., 2023).

Coping Strategies Used by University Students - To address these stressors, Filipino university students apply

various coping mechanisms which includes highly adaptive problem-focused strategies to maladaptive and avoidant behaviors. Students frequently employed problem-focused and resilience-oriented coping mechanisms which included self-regulation, time management, and peer support, seeking consultation and social support, health-promoting behaviors, active coping, positive cognitive restructuring, and utilizing humor to buffer stress (Jaca et al., 2024; Labrague, 2021; Labrague, 2022; Ridad et al., 2024 Tan et al., 2025). Religious coping was also prominent with students using prayer for gratitude, guidance and emotion regulation (Del Castillo et al., 2023). The literature further highlighted boundary-setting, routine reconstruction, creative self-care, and digital correspondence with others as strategies to maintain psychological wellbeing and manage stress during periods of disruption (Roxas 2023). Emotion-focused coping methods, such as social media use – particularly Facebook – was frequently employed during the pandemic (Balberan & Bengwasan, 2024; Labrague, 2022). However, it must also be noted that maladaptive strategies such as avoidance, substance use, emotional eating, and alcohol consumption were also reported, especially among students experiencing high stress and perfectionism (Tan et al, 2025; Labrague, 2022).

Existing Mental Health Interventions, Services, and Identified Gaps - In the review of existing literature, only one interventional study was identified. Stress Inoculation training (SIT) demonstrated effectiveness in reducing perceived stress among senior college students in the Philippines (Bersamin, 2023). This supports the feasibility of a structured intervention program in Philippine university settings. Despite high stress prevalence, the literature revealed that there is a scarcity of evaluated mental health interventions. Furthermore, there is limited discussion of institutional services that address these problems. Most studies focused on identifying stressors and coping strategies rather than assessing programmatic or systemic responses. To address these gaps, the findings suggest that there is a need for (1) an expanded, evidence-based stress management programs, (2) early identification of high risk groups (younger students, female students, and low-income students), (3) integration of mental health services into academic systems, particularly during crises, and (4) promotion of adaptive coping while addressing maladaptive behaviors such as avoidance and substance use. Collectively, these recommendations highlight the importance of a comprehensive, proactive, and institutionally supported approach to student mental health.

4. Conclusion

This scoping review provides a synthesis of existing literature on stress among university students in the Philippines. The study highlights the multifaceted nature of stress within this population. The findings demonstrate that stress is a pervasive and a considerable concern shaped by various demands such as academic concerns, pandemic related disruptions, psychosocial challenges, and socioeconomic inequalities. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, amplified pre-existing stressors by introducing abrupt shifts in learning modalities, heightened health anxieties, and increased barriers to educational resources. Across the reviewed studies, academic and institutional pressures such as heavy workload, performance expectations, and transitions to online learning emerged as the most prominent stressors. These were further compounded by psychosocial and contextual factors, including health-related fears, interpersonal challenges, environmental disruptions, and financial constraints. Moreover, stress was not only widespread but also associated with substantial adverse outcomes including diminished psychological well-being, reduced resilience, lower quality of life, and increased vulnerability to psychological distress.

The review also identified key predictors and risk factors, with younger students, female students, and those in lower academic levels demonstrating heightened susceptibility to stress. Characteristics such as low resilience and perfectionism, as well as structural disadvantages including limited access to digital resources, further exacerbated stress levels. These findings highlight the importance of adopting a multidimensional perspective that considers not only individual factors, but also systemic determinants of stress. In response to these stressors, students employ various coping strategies ranging from adaptive approaches such as problem-solving, social support, and religious coping, as well as maladaptive coping such as avoidance, substance use, and emotional eating. While the presence of adaptive coping reflects students' resilience, the concurrent use of maladaptive

strategies highlights the need for guided and structured support systems.

Despite the high burden of stress, a critical gap is identified in the limited availability of empirically evaluated mental health interventions within Philippine university contexts. The predominance of descriptive and correlational studies points to a lack of emphasis on intervention development and institutional response. Although preliminary evidence supports the effectiveness of structure approaches such as SIT, there remains a need for more comprehensive, scalable, and contextually appropriate mental health programs. Overall, the findings of this review emphasize the urgent need for higher education institutions to adopt proactive, evidence-based, and student-centered approaches. This includes strengthening institutional support systems, integrating mental health services into academic environments, targeting high-risk populations, and promoting adaptive coping strategies. As such, student support programs should focus on skills training for emotion regulation, awareness against maladaptive coping strategies, and assisting the transition into higher education life. Future research should prioritize intervention studies and program evaluations to bridge the gap between understanding stress and effectively addressing it. As such, by doing so, universities can better support the needs of students.

AI Declaration - During the preparation of this work, the authors utilized automated platforms and large language models to assist with workflow efficiency and manuscript refinement. Specifically, the Rayyan platform was employed during the study selection phase, where its automated features were used solely for the initial detection of potential duplicate records, while the actual removal of duplicates and subsequent screening of titles, abstracts, and full texts were executed entirely through manual review by the authors. Additionally, the Gemini large language model was utilized during the drafting process as an assistive tool to correct grammar, refine sentence structure, and improve the overall clarity and readability of the text. All final eligibility decisions, data interpretations, and manuscript revisions were verified and approved solely by the human authors, who maintain full accountability for the integrity of the work.

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