



## Not My Choice: The Lived Experiences of Freshman Pre-service Teachers Enrolled in a Non-Preferred Program in Central Luzon, Philippines

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose of the study:** Teachers play a crucial role in national development, with their passion and commitment being essential to student success. However, one of the necessary elements to become passionate and committed to the teaching profession is to enroll first in an undergraduate teacher education program because this leads to better preparation. Thus, this study sought an in-depth look into the program commitment and academic experiences of first-year preservice teachers enrolled in a non-preferred program.

**Methodology:** This phenomenological research explored the lived experiences of freshman pre-service teachers enrolled in a non-preferred program. The experiences of the nine informants were explored by conducting interviews focusing on realities that happen when enrolled in a non-preferred program. Particularly, conversational interviewing was used for an in-depth idea of thought processes and worldviews. Moreover, the Colaizzi' method was followed.

**Main Findings:** Findings revealed that the informants faced disappointments, educational challenges, later appreciation of the program, motivation from support systems, and aspirations for a better future. These ranges of experiences can be further categorized into five themes: (a) recognizing educational aspirations, (b) transitioning to higher education, (c) embracing the current program, (d) achieving personal growth, and (e) traversing to the future.

**Novelty/Originality of this study:** This study offers an original contribution by closely examining how students in non-preferred academic programs develop academic commitment through adaptive processes over time. It highlights the importance of support systems, broad opportunities and positive academic experiences, and how these factors helps with students' internal coping strategies and identity reconstruction. The study reveals a nuanced, multi-phase progression—from initial disengagement to eventual integration—driven by institutional resources, peer interactions, and emerging self-agency. This progression addresses a gap in understanding how educational environments creates positive learning experiences and sustained commitment in misaligned academic placements.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Teachers are role models and mentors responsible for guiding individuals to achieve their full potential [1]. The Philippines can ensure well-rounded, value-driven, and 21st-century skills-equipped learners through passionate and committed teachers, which is perfectly aligned with the Philippine Department of Education's

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goal [2]. However, the Programme for International Student Assessment, conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, seems to reflect a completely different story. Results from the assessments suggest that the Philippines falls behind in reading, math, and science. In 2022, for example, the Philippines ranked 77th out of 81 countries [3], [4]. Despite efforts to improve education quality, the Philippines still lags behind global reading, math, and science standards, with no significant improvement since 2019 [5]. Additionally, in 2019, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, which assesses fourth and eighth-grade students, revealed that the Philippines scored only 297 in mathematics and 249 in science, ranking lowest among 58 participating countries [6]. One factor to consider in the alarming results is teachers' passion and commitment to the profession.

To be specific, teachers should be passionate and committed to their work. Passion fuels commitment, and together they inspire, shaping student performance and attitudes [7], [8]. However, genuine passion often begins with purposeful enrollment in a teacher education program. Many pre-service teachers enter these programs without intentional choice, driven by external factors like financial constraints, career trends, academic standing, and social pressures [9]. Such misalignment contributes to high dropout rates—35.15% in SY 2023–2024 according to the Philippine Commission on Higher Education (CHED) [10]—and to graduate mismatches, exacerbating unemployment and underemployment [11], [12]. Poor program selection not only weakens commitment but also undermines the quality and integrity of the future teaching force [8].

#### *Free tertiary education in the Philippines*

Choosing a program in college is an important life decision because of its long-term effects [9]. However, making a choice is influenced by many factors, like accessibility and the availability of a preferred program. Fortunately, the passing of Republic Act 10931 made higher education more accessible. Specifically, this act promotes universal access to quality tertiary education by providing free tuition and other school fees in state universities and colleges (SUCs), local universities and colleges (LUCs), and state-run technical-vocational institutions (TVIs). Also included in this act is the establishment of the tertiary education subsidy and student loan program and the strengthening of the unified student financial assistance system for tertiary education [12], [13]. By investing in human capital through free tertiary education, countries can cultivate a skilled workforce capable of driving innovation, attracting foreign investment, and remaining competitive on the international stage [14]. However, despite the accessibility of higher education in the Philippines, particularly tuition fees in SUCs, LUCs, and state-run TVIs, some higher education students are still not enrolled in their preferred programs. This may be for financial reasons. To be specific, there is an income advantage in accessibility to higher education in developing countries like the Philippines, and the new free tuition policy is likely to disproportionately benefit students from richer families [15].

#### *Choosing a program*

Career opportunities, personal interests, passion, and skills are leading factors that affect program choices [9], [16]. When students are committed, the program choice process concludes [17]. However, students can break their commitment and choose to enroll in a different program. The reality of financial constraints and accessibility issues often forces students to opt for non-preferred programs [18]. Furthermore, students may change their commitment when they realize that the program they were previously committed to no longer aligns well with their interests, leading them to abandon the initial program [17].

On one hand, students who enroll in their preferred programs tend to exhibit higher levels of commitment and motivation [19]. This commitment is influenced by factors such as intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and parental support [9], [20], [16], [19], [18]. Students who feel a strong connection to their chosen program are more likely to stay engaged and perform well academically [11], [19]. The commitment of students to their preferred programs often translates into better academic performance and higher satisfaction with their educational experience [16], [19].

On the other hand, lack of commitment to a program can have several negative consequences. These include lower academic performance, decreased retention rates, and reduced overall satisfaction with the educational experience [9], [20], [18]. Also, students who are not committed to their programs may experience higher levels of stress and anxiety, which can impact their academic success [21], [18]. Moreover, without a strong sense of commitment, students are less likely to engage in meaningful learning activities, leading to a lack of skill development and preparedness for future careers. This can ultimately affect their employability and career progression [19], [18].

To date, even if a number of studies have investigated concerns related to students being enrolled in non-preferred programs, said studies did not dwell in depth on the actual experiences of students involved, particularly among pre-service teachers and in the context of the Philippines. Also, most extant literature used quantitative methods of research. Thus, complex factors and personal narratives have not been thoroughly documented, leading to an incomplete understanding of their experiences. The present study sought to take an in-depth look into the experiences of first-year preservice teachers with a teacher education program not being their preferred program.

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

### **2.1. Research Design and Setting**

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of freshman pre-service teachers enrolled in a non-preferred program. Specifically, descriptive phenomenology was used. It describes a certain phenomenon experienced by humans by attempting to set aside biases and assumptions about experiences, feelings, and responses [22]. The study was conducted within the context of Philippine higher education, involving informants from Central Luzon, Philippines.

### **2.2. Sampling and Sample Size**

Nine informants were chosen through purposive sampling. Maximum variation was employed in selecting the first-year pre-service teachers to ensure a wide range of perspectives. It is a sampling method aimed at collecting data from the widest range of perspectives, the main purpose of which is to understand the phenomenon from a variety of angles [23]. The following parameters were considered: freshmen preservice teachers enrolled in a non-preferred program, preferred program, program currently enrolled in, type of school attended, and reasons for not enrolling in the preferred program.

Some informants were approached based on their known characteristics that matched the set parameters, while others were referred by previous informants. Responses were initially analyzed alongside data collection to identify data saturation. No new content or significant statements were identified after the 9th informant was interviewed. At this point, the sample size was deemed sufficient since data saturation had been reached based on the inductive thematic saturation model [24].

### **2.3. Data Collection Procedure**

During the data collection, a positivist approach was used to capture the educational experiences of freshman pre-service teachers through unstructured, in-depth interviews using a conversational style. The choice of unstructured interviews was justified by their capacity to facilitate a natural dialogue, enabling informants to articulate their thought processes, emotional dimensions, and worldviews without being constrained by predetermined questions. Such an approach is particularly apt for exploring complex, lived experiences, as it encourages the emergence of spontaneous reflection and rich detail that structured formats might otherwise suppress [25]. Conversational interviewing paves the way for an in-depth idea of thought processes and worldviews. It can focus on the emotional dimensions of experiences, concepts, and meanings [26]. This was done to find out the answer to the question, “What are the lived experiences of freshman pre-service teachers? Follow-up questions were asked, such as, “What was your preferred program and the reason why you didn’t enroll in it?””, “What was your initial reaction when you realized that you were to enroll in a non-preferred program?” and “What are your goals and plans in connection to your current program?”. Contextual questions were also asked as the interview unfolded naturally. Interviews were conducted in private, with the informants’ convenience and comfort in mind. Zoom Meetings and Messenger video calls were utilized.

### **2.4. Data Analysis**

Conversations were transcribed using TurboScribe. Data were analyzed using Collaizi’s method for procedural interpretation of phenomenology. The steps involved familiarization with the narratives, identifying and assigning codes to significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, developing exhaustive descriptions, producing the fundamental structure, and verifying the fundamental structure [27].

### **2.5. Trustworthiness of Data**

Ensuring data trustworthiness is essential in qualitative research. The four key dimensions of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were meticulously addressed. Enhancing these aspects is crucial for accurately representing the phenomenon. Credibility, or confidence in the data's truth and interpretation, was maintained through member checking, where each informant reviewed the outputs. Member checking is aimed at creating trust [28].

To further ensure data credibility beyond member checking, several additional strategies were implemented. First, audio recordings of all interviews were transcribed verbatim and cross-examined by multiple researchers to confirm the accuracy of the data and reduce individual bias. Second, data triangulation was achieved by conducting interviews across different platforms (e.g., Zoom Meetings and Messenger video calls) and comparing the narratives across these settings. Third, peer debriefing sessions and reflective journaling were maintained throughout the data collection process, providing an audit trail that documented the evolution of themes and offered transparent insight into the researchers’ decision-making. Together, these measures not only bolstered the internal validity of the findings but also ensured a comprehensive and trustworthy exploration of the informants’ lived experiences [29].

To ensure transferability or the applicability of findings to other settings, interview transcripts were included. This provides a paper trail that other researchers can use to apply the study's conclusions to different contexts. Independent expert auditing was conducted to ensure the objectivity of the data (confirmability) and its stability over time and different conditions (dependability).

## 2.6. Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all informants, ensuring they fully understood the research objectives and their rights. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed, with pseudonyms assigned to protect their identities. Interview transcripts and audio recordings were securely stored and deleted after transcription to maintain privacy.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Results

The informants shared their goals, feelings, challenges, motivations, and program commitment as students enrolled in their non-preferred programs. They came from different programs under teacher education, educational institutions, and have varying reasons for not enrolling in their preferred programs. Table 1 describes the profile of the informants.

Table 1. Summary of the informants' demographic profile

Pseudonym	Age	Preferred Program	Enrolled Program	University/ College Attended	Reasons for not enrolling in Preferred Program
Jeannette	18	Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering	Bachelor of Secondary Education major in Mathematics (BSEd-Mathematics)	Agricultural state university in the province of Pampanga	Unable to secure a slot due to late submission of requirements
Mycah	18	Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering/ BS Psychology	Bachelor of Secondary Education major in Mathematics (BSEd-Mathematics)	Agricultural state university in the province of Pampanga	Unable to secure a slot/ program not offered in the nearest school
Aaron	18	Culinary Arts or Hotel and Restaurant Management (HRM)	Bachelor of Secondary Education major in English (BSEd-English)	Technological state university in the province of Tarlac	The cost of pursuing Culinary/HRM was too high
Dianne	19	Bachelor of Science in Nursing	Bachelor of Secondary Education major in English (BSEd-English)	Private college in the province of Tarlac	Failed the entrance exam
Arah	18	Bachelor of Science in Psychology/ Criminology	Bachelor of Technology and Livelihood Education (BTLEd)	Agricultural state university in the province of Nueva Ecija	Financial difficulties
Laurice	18	Bachelor of Science in Tourism/ Criminology	Bachelor of Technology and Livelihood Education (BTLEd)	Agricultural state university in the province of Nueva Ecija	Unable to secure a slot
John	18	Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering	Bachelor of Secondary Education major in English (BSEd-English)	Technological state university in the province of Tarlac	Unable to secure a slot
Andrei	18	Bachelor of Science in Nursing	Bachelor of Science in Exercise and Sports Sciences major in Fitness	Technological state university in the province of Pampanga	Not admitted

Heaven	19	Bachelor of Science in Tourism	and Sports Coaching (BSESS) Bachelor of Physical Education (BPE)	Agricultural state university in the province of Pampanga	Financial difficulties
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Table 2. Summary of open codes, clusters, and categories

Open Codes	Clusters	Categories
Having preference for other programs (Civil Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Psychology, Culinary Arts/Hotel and Restaurant Management, Nursing, Criminology, and Tourism)	Initial program preference	Recognizing educational aspirations
Having long-standing career dreams inspired by personal experiences or family influences	Career goals	
Experiencing difficulty with academic tasks	Challenges encountered	Transitioning to higher education
Encountering financial pressures		
Managing workloads		
Realizing that college is different from high school realizing the need to adapt	Current program realizations	
Demonstrating resilience by adapting study habits and maintaining a positive outlook	Adjustments to the new academic environments	Embracing the current program
Adjusting to the program by developing coping mechanisms including practicing skills at home and time management		
Participating in academic events to integrate socially	Social integration	
Developing connections		
Seeking support from classmates and forming friendships		
Family members serving as source of motivation	Motivation	
Having a sense of fulfillment		
Seeing the bigger picture		
Exploring new opportunities		
Recognizing personal growth by overcoming challenges	Growth despite challenges	Achieving personal growth
Finding fulfillment and purpose in current programs		
Having faith in a supreme being	Acceptance of the plans of supreme being	
Trusting the supreme being's plan	Future goals	Traversing to the future
Having clear visions for the future		
Having the desire to make families proud		
Dreaming of being of service to others		
Completing the program	Commitment	
Having the determination to succeed		
Planning to be in the teaching profession		
Believing that teaching is a noble profession		

Data from the interviews revealed five main categories: (a) recognizing educational aspirations, (b) transitioning to higher education, (c) embracing the current program, (d) achieving personal growth, and (e) traversing to the future. These categories were related to each other and capture the full meaning of the phenomenon.

#### Category I: *Recognizing educational aspirations*

This category describes the informants' initial program preferences and career goals. Jeannette's statement describes her preferred program and her reasons: "Originally, I wanted to pursue civil engineering. Part of the reason for that was because it was my dad's dream to become a civil engineer, but he couldn't afford to go to school for it. I felt like it was my responsibility to fulfill that dream for him. My second brother is also a civil engineer, which kind of made me feel like I should continue what my dad had started. However, even though I was focused on civil engineering, I've always had an interest in math, and I thought that engineering would be a good fit for me because it involves a lot of math." Still on engineering as a preferred program, John's describes how he dreams of becoming an electrical engineer: My first choice was electrical engineering. Ever

since I was a child, I dreamed of becoming an engineer, and that dream persisted through high school. Engineering has always been in my mind and heart. I was inspired to become an electrical engineer because of one of my godfathers. He influenced me to aspire to this field, and I idolize him for his achievements. From the beginning, this dream has been very dear to me—to become an electrical engineer.”

As for Mycah: "Psychology has always been my dream program. I've always been interested in interacting with people and understanding their behavior. It's fascinating to me how our minds work and how different experiences shape our actions. I love learning about why people do what they do and how they process the world around them. This passion for human behavior made psychology the perfect choice for me, even though I ended up in BSEd-Mathematics."

Meanwhile, Aaron describes his childhood dream: "I would choose to enroll in culinary/hotel and restaurant management. Ever since I was a child, I've been captivated by cooking shows, and I always imagined myself becoming a successful chef. I love the idea of showcasing my skills in the kitchen on a global stage. The thought of creating delicious dishes that people from all around the world would enjoy excites me. Cooking feels like a creative outlet where I can experiment with ingredients and see the joy my food brings to others. It's more than just following recipes; it's about creating something meaningful."

Dianne expresses how she was inspired to become a nurse abroad: When I learned that nursing is in demand abroad, it influenced me to pursue nursing instead. Aside from that, I am also curious about what it's like to be a nursing student—what they do, like dissecting and memorizing all the body parts.” Still focusing on nursing as a preferred program, Andrei shares, "Growing up, my grandmother had a stroke, and I often took care of her when other relatives weren't around. I became her one-call-away caregiver. This experience motivated me to help others with their medical needs and fueled my passion for the medical field, to pursue a Bachelor of Science in Nursing.”

With reference to Arah, she shares about becoming a soldier or police officer: “Initially, I wanted to take criminology because my dream has always been to join the military. I thought criminology would open a path to becoming a soldier or police officer.” Similarly, Laurice shares, “I wanted to be a police officer. Since I was young, I watched action movies with my dad, and I found them fascinating. I was inspired by my father, who loved watching those movies, especially action heroes like Fernando Poe Jr.”

Heaven explains why he likes tourism: “It was my dream to pursue tourism. I saw it online and thought tourism would be a good choice because of its wide job opportunities and high-income potential, like being a flight attendant.”

#### Category II: *Transitioning to higher education*

This category describes the educational experiences of the informants while taking their non-preferred program, which is a teacher education program, as they transition to higher education. These include challenges encountered and current program realizations.

Jeannette describes her initial disappointments: “I lost my slot in the civil engineering program because I was late submitting my grades due to a delayed graduation from senior high, so I ended up in BSEd-Mathematics. Adjusting has been tough, especially with public speaking, as my senior high science, technology, engineering, and mathematics focus didn't prepare me for it. When I first learned I was assigned to mathematics, I was overwhelmed and cried, as it wasn't what I had envisioned. It took about a week for me to accept this new path, and the transition has been challenging and emotionally draining.” Similarly, Mycah states her initial reactions: “When I found out I didn't get into civil engineering, I was really disappointed because I had worked hard and thought my grades were good enough. After a few days, I accepted it and decided to make the best of the situation. In BSEd-Mathematics, I initially thought it would be easier, but it turned out to be more complex than I imagined. Since math isn't my true passion, staying motivated has been challenging.”

Aaron describes his struggles and ways to cope: "In terms of challenges, there are times when the workload becomes overwhelming. College is a different level compared to high school. The reports, field learning activities, presentations, quizzes, and deadlines can feel like a lot. I've learned to cope by managing my time as effectively as possible and by staying positive. I always remind myself that I can handle it with the support of my family and faith. Financial challenges also add to the stress. The cost of tuition, books, and other fees is a big burden, and sometimes I find myself wondering if I'll be able to keep up. The pressure of the academic workload and financial stress can weigh on my mental health, but I try to stay focused and trust that I'll make it through." John also shares his struggles: First, I find it very difficult to construct sentences. Second, I struggle to keep up with my classmates because they're always able to recite in perfect sentences and in flawless English. I often feel left behind in class, as there are times when I can't recite. But I try my best to participate, recite, and construct sentences in English.

Dianne shares that she overthinks about her current program: “Since this isn't my first-choice program, it's hard to go to school every day knowing there are so many what-ifs running through my mind. I think, what if I passed my dream program? Maybe I'd be happier going to school.” Similarly, Andrei explains his experience of not being accepted in a preferred program: “I passed the entrance exam and proceeded to the interview phase.

During the interview, I was screened, but when the results came out, I didn't receive an email confirming my acceptance. It felt like a major setback, as I was heartbroken and uncertain about what to do next.

### Category III. *Embracing the current program*

This category describes how the informants embraced their current programs. It includes adjustments to the new academic environments, social integration, and motivation.

As to Arah's feelings: "Now, I feel at peace with my decision. I've been adjusting well, and my current program feels natural—almost like it's the path I was meant to take. My faith in God keeps me motivated. I trust His words and believe He has a plan for me. Even though I didn't understand His plan at first, I now see the bigger picture. Before, I thought I had no future in education, but now, I'm grateful for this path." Heaven also describes his feelings: "I enjoy physical education because of the activities, which apply to daily life. For example, we have Physical Education activities; it's not just about physical education; it's also about life skills. 'I've made a lot of friends, including seniors like the second-year students.' Laurice expresses how she copes: "The experience has been difficult, but I'm coping with the support of my classmates. I'm adjusting now, and being with my new classmates has made it easier."

Aaron, as he described his realizations and motivations: "As a future teacher, you have to constantly adapt and be prepared for the demands of society. It's a tough journey, but I find it fulfilling knowing that teachers play such an important role in broadening children's minds. I've also come to realize that teaching is not just a job; it's a calling. This shift in perspective has motivated me to push through the challenges and stay focused on the goal of becoming a teacher." Also, Aaron articulated his motivations: "What motivates me to stay committed to my program is my family, especially my mom. She has always been supportive of my decision to pursue education, and I know how happy she will be when I finally graduate. She's been a huge influence on me to continue, and I don't think I made a mistake by choosing this program. My friends also motivate me a lot. We share a lot of experiences and support each other through the challenges, and I look forward to the day when we graduate together and can proudly say that we are educators" while for Dianne: "My parents are my biggest motivation to pursue my dreams. Even though we are financially unstable, I see how hard my parents work to provide for us. That inspires me to study hard, graduate, and eventually help them. That's what keeps me going and motivates me to do my best in school." As for Andrei: "I treated the rejection as a chance to enroll in a different program and explore new opportunities. I kept myself motivated and shifted my focus to what was available to me. My mother, who is currently working abroad, is my biggest inspiration. She has been supporting me financially and emotionally, and I consider her sacrifices as a driving force in my studies. I sought out friends who share the same humor and positive energy, which makes the learning experience fun and engaging."

Jeannette states, "now, though, I can honestly say that I like my program more than I did before. It wasn't an easy transition, but things have been going well. I've made some good friends in class, and that has helped me feel more comfortable. Getting along well with my classmates has made the whole experience more bearable, and I can say I'm adjusting better now than I was before." Similarly, Mycha's motivations are "The support and encouragement I get from my friends make the challenges more bearable. It's so much easier to cope when you know some people are going through the same struggles and who understand what you're experiencing. Their presence and support keep me motivated to keep going, even when I feel like giving up."

### Category IV: *Achieving personal growth*

This category explains how the informants are growing despite challenges and the acceptance of the plans of the supreme being. Jeannette describes, "I've learned to appreciate my program. Sometimes it's better to be challenged by things you initially don't enjoy." She emphasized that these challenges help one grow. "Now, I can say I feel challenged, and it's pushing me to do better. I believe that God has a better plan for me than I could have imagined. I may not be doing what I initially wanted, but I'm trusting that this is the path I'm supposed to be on, and I'm trying to make the most of it." As for Andrei: "At first, I thought about shifting to physical education, but during orientation, I discovered many opportunities within this program. I realized how broad and versatile the program is. It offers a deeper and more comprehensive understanding compared to traditional physical education majors, which eventually piqued my interest and inspired me to commit to it," while for Mycah, "I decided to focus on the potential job opportunities that the program could provide. I started learning more about the demand for math teachers and the salary prospects, and I realized that being in this field could offer me a stable and well-paying career."

Aaron states, As a future teacher, you have to constantly adapt and be prepared for the demands of society. It's a tough journey, but I find it fulfilling knowing that teachers play such an important role in broadening children's minds. I've also come to realize that teaching is not just a job; it's a calling. This shift in perspective has motivated me to push through the challenges and stay focused on the goal of becoming a teacher. While for Arah, "I believe this program is my stepping stone toward achieving my dreams in the future. Though my ultimate goal remains to join the military, I trust that God placed me here for a reason. I plan to finish my education degree and then pursue my dream of becoming a soldier." Heaven states, "Teaching is a noble

profession, but it requires dedication, passion, and consistency. You also need patience, especially when managing many students with different personalities.”

#### Category V. *Traversing to the future*

This category encapsulates the informants’ future goals and commitment. Jeannette states: “I’m planning to continue with this program. I think it would be a waste to shift now, especially since it would add another year to my studies. It would take me five years to finish, and I’d rather stick it out. Plus, I’ve discovered that I enjoy traveling, and I’m hoping to go abroad after graduation. Many countries are looking for math teachers, and the salaries abroad are higher than here. That makes it more appealing. I’ve thought about it a lot, and I feel like this is the right path for me now.” Similarly, Mycah also wants to finish the program: “Yes, I definitely plan to finish the program. Despite the challenges and my initial doubts, I realized that shifting to another program would just delay my graduation. I want to graduate on time, and I understand that shifting to another program would add another year to my academic journey. I’ve come this far, and even though it’s not what I initially wanted, I think it’s better to finish what I’ve started. Plus, the friendships and experiences I’ve gained have made me more determined to succeed. I know that my friends will be with me every step of the way, which helps me stay focused on my goal.”

Aaron expresses: “The motivation to stay in this program comes from my passion for teaching. I know that it’s not going to be easy, but I’m committed to doing my best because I truly believe that being an educator is where I’m meant to be. Every day, I remind myself that I’m not just going through the motions—I’m working toward something that will help shape the lives of future generations. I also look forward to the future, where I’ll meet new people and hopefully make a difference in the lives of my students. I can already picture myself on graduation day, proudly holding my diploma as I begin my journey as a teacher.” And as for Andrei, he imagines himself to be a successful teacher and sports coach: “In 10 years, I imagine myself as a successful teacher and sports coach. I want to help my family financially and pass any examinations or challenges that come my way. I aim to apply the values and skills I’ve learned to contribute to my community and personal growth.” Heaven also dreams of teaching in a dream school: “If I can continue until my fourth year, then in 10 years, I imagine myself teaching at my dream school.”

### 3.2. Discussion

The present study’s findings illuminate the diverse experiences of freshmen pre-service teachers in their non-programs across various universities and colleges in Central Luzon, Philippines. By exploring their motivations, challenges, and insights, the research highlights essential considerations for policymakers and educators to address possible attrition issues and improve student retention strategies. With the conduct of in-depth interviews, five important categories have been established: (a) recognizing educational aspirations, (b) transitioning to higher education, (c) embracing the current program, (d) achieving personal growth, and (e) traversing to the future.

Focusing on the recognition of educational aspirations, the present study revealed that all students initially preferred different programs such as civil engineering, electrical engineering, psychology, culinary arts/hotel and restaurant management, nursing, criminology, and tourism. These programs were very different from the current programs they are enrolled in. It must be noted that students’ university choices and satisfaction are significantly influenced by their initial program preference and career goals [30]. Said reality has also been highlighted in the responses of the informants of the present study. Equally important is the recognition that financial constraints play a big role in program choices. It must be noted that financial constraints and accessibility issues often force students to opt for non-preferred programs [18]. Their eventual enrollment in non-preferred programs was shaped by factors such as financial constraints, limited availability of program slots, and accessibility issues—dynamics supported by the Social and Cultural Capital Theory [31], which highlights how structural inequities shape educational trajectories. Considering the plight of students enrolled in their non-preferred programs, it is important to recognize other factors as well to ensure their retention in their respective programs. Higher education institutions (HEIs) should enhance transparency in program offerings and availability while developing targeted communication strategies to help students align their aspirations with realistic options. Early guidance interventions—ideally beginning in senior high school—can help reconcile students’ goals with practical limitations [32], [33].

As to the second category focusing on the transition to higher education, it is important to recognize that students enrolled in their non-preferred programs may face greater academic difficulties and challenges as they experience the complex transition from high school to higher education. Students enrolled in their non-preferred programs may have been forced to enroll because of financial problems, limited program slots, unsuitable academic performance, and other external influences such as parental and peer influence and societal expectations [9], [16]. Thus, there is a need to address challenges faced by a comprehensive support system [34]. It must be noted that students enrolled in non-preferred programs face several challenges, which include emotional stress, the need to balance multiple responsibilities, adjusting to a new academic environment, managing expectations, and finding motivation [35], [21], [18]. This aligns closely with the Transition Theory,



which posits that transitions are navigated based on personal resources and available support structures [36]. The end goal is to aid these students not only in successfully transitioning but also in having a greater appreciation of the program they are currently enrolled in. Higher education institutions (HEIs) must implement comprehensive onboarding programs that address the needs of students in non-preferred tracks. Academic bridging programs, mentorship initiatives, and mental health services can ease the transition and reduce stress, ultimately supporting smoother adaptation [37], [32].

Giving emphasis to the third category, embracing the current program, it must be remembered that over time, students may begin to appreciate the opportunities associated with their current programs. The important role of effective practices in student success, retention, and completion should be given emphasis [33]. By participating in academic events to integrate socially and develop connections, students may eventually have a better appreciation of their current program. Promotion of coping mechanisms like practicing necessary academic skills at home, time management, and seeking support from classmates are equally relevant. Support from family members, forming friendships, and building support networks also creates the necessary motivations to carry on [9], [20], [21], [16], [19], [18]. This is being supported by the Student Integration Model [38], which emphasizes that academic and social integration are critical to student persistence. Students who feel connected to their academic environment are more likely to stay enrolled in their current program. Institutions should invest in structured engagement strategies such as student organizations, academic societies, and community-building events. These initiatives not only support social integration but also foster a sense of belonging and ownership over one's educational path [37].

As for the achievement of growth, students may come to recognize personal development by overcoming challenges. Also, belief in a supreme being may be important in the process of achieving personal growth. Both personal and spiritual growth play a role in student retention [39]. Thus, students' resilience, the ability to find meaning, motivation, and faith are all important. This echoes Self-Determination Theory [40], which emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness as key motivators for growth. With growth being part of the experience in college, it can be guaranteed that students can realize their potentials. The realization of one's potential is an important ingredient of success. Colleges should embed reflective practices into the curriculum—such as journaling, values clarification workshops, and personal goal-setting activities—to encourage self-discovery and resilience. Faculty can be trained to facilitate growth-oriented conversations with students to promote meaning-making [32].

With reference to traversing the future, having a clear vision of an ideal future is important. This may be driven by the goals stated by the informants of the present study, like becoming educators, joining the military, or working abroad, driven by the desire to make their families proud and achieve long-term career goals. These goals, as shared by the informants, will keep them going and will serve as their main guide in continuing with the program. To be specific, there may be three pathways to life goals, which may be proactive, reactive, and through social learning [41]. One important component of these goals, though, is the focus on task-based goals, since it can improve performance in the program [42]. Additionally, setting a goal affects use of time, effort to study, and discipline [43]. Generally, it can be said that having a goal and a sense of purpose is important. Program commitment is also important, and this may be fueled by career opportunities, personal interest, passion, and skills [9], [16]. Thus, efforts must be exerted to integrate purpose into the college experience [41]. Institutions should offer robust career development services early in students' academic journeys. Workshops on goal setting, career planning, and values-based decision-making can help students connect their current program experience to long-term ambitions, improving motivation and performance [37].

In the end, understanding the college experience, particularly among those enrolled in their non-preferred programs, is important and very timely. It must be noted that program choice and eventually admission may be attributed to a number of factors, including but not limited to performance prior to entering college, with grades as the most common basis, and socio-economic considerations. Thus, understanding the experience of those enrolled in non-degree programs can lead to better policies aimed at guaranteeing a positive college experience. The positive college experience may significantly contribute to arresting the increase in student attrition, which is a major concern among HEIs. By being more proactive and responsive in addressing the concerns of students, HEIs can ensure that students will thrive even though they are enrolled in their non-preferred programs. Support should be extended where it is needed the most.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded from the study that freshman pre-service teachers in non-preferred programs undergo a distinctive adaptive trajectory. Initially marked by disappointment and disillusionment, many participants gradually shifted toward program acceptance and even genuine appreciation. Key drivers of this transition included strong support from family and friends, targeted orientation and immersion initiatives, and robust academic and peer support systems. These findings contribute to the literature by elucidating the process

through which external support and rich academic experiences transform initial disengagement into sustained commitment—particularly in the context of higher education within the Philippines.

The research underscores the importance of designing educational policies such as enhanced transition and orientation programs dedicated academic advising and mentorship, and strengthened support services, that foster nurturing environments in partnerships with the Guidance Counseling Office, Office of Student Affairs, faculty and school administration, thereby enabling students in non-preferred programs to thrive. By highlighting how tailored support mechanisms and varied opportunities can redefine student perceptions and career aspirations, the study lays the groundwork for developing targeted interventions that promote both personal and professional development.

Future research should extend this inquiry through cross-cultural comparisons and investigations in diverse educational settings. Such studies could explore whether similar adaptive processes occur in different countries or cultural contexts and examine the influence of varied institutional practices on student outcomes. Additionally, longitudinal research could further illuminate the evolution of students' perceptions and commitments over time, providing deeper insight into the long-term impact of early academic experiences.

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