



Unchosen Paths: A Phenomenological Investigation on Students' Experiences in Non-Preferred Programs

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ABSTRACT

College is often seen as a journey of choice and self-discovery, yet not all students can pursue the program they truly desire. While existing research has examined academic performance, career readiness, and student satisfaction, less attention has been given to how students in non-preferred programs experience, interpret, and adjust to the mismatch between their original academic preferences and their current programs. This study explored the lived experiences of college students in non-preferred programs, focusing on their initial reactions, adjustment difficulties, changing motivation, coping processes, and ways of finding meaning in an academic path they did not originally choose. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed, with five third- and fourth-year students selected through criterion sampling. Data were gathered through five semi-structured face-to-face interviews using a researcher-made interview guide and were analyzed using Colaizzi's Method. The results show that students initially experienced confusion, low motivation, uncertainty, and difficulty adjusting to unfamiliar academic demands. Over time, their responses developed in different ways: some found personal meaning and stronger connections with their current programs, others continued to struggle while relying on support and personal goals, and some adapted mainly through practical adjustment and persistence toward graduation. Support from peers, family, and instructors, together with personal reflection and adaptive learning practices, helped students manage their academic situations. The findings show that adjustment in non-preferred programs is not a uniform process and may range from deeper personal integration to functional or instrumental persistence.

Keywords: student perspectives, educational pathways, non-preferred programs, institutional placement, phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

College is an important stage in a person's life because it provides opportunities to develop knowledge, prepare for a future profession, and grow personally. Choosing a degree program is therefore more than selecting a field of study; it can represent a student's interests, aspirations, and plans for the future. When a program matches a student's interests, it may provide a stronger sense of purpose and encourage greater motivation and engagement in academic activities (Galotti & Umscheid, 2019). A college degree may likewise represent more than preparation for employment, as it can reflect personal goals, achievement, and the effort invested in building a desired future.

However, the opportunity to choose a preferred program is not equally available to all students. Some students are unable to enter their desired programs because they do not meet required grades (Maloshonok & Terentev, 2017), cut-off scores (Wyness, 2023), or admission test requirements (Jiang, 2019). Others may face practical conditions such as financial limitations, program availability, or the need to study in a particular location. As a result, some students choose or accept another program to remain in college even when it was not part of their original plans (Campbell, 2019). Entering a different program may allow them to continue their education, but it can also create a gap between what they initially wanted and what they are actually experiencing in college. This gap may influence how students understand their academic situation, respond to course demands, and view their future.

Existing research has examined students' academic performance, career readiness, satisfaction, and other outcomes related to their college experiences (Rachmawati et al., 2024). However, less attention has been given to the personal experiences of students who remain in programs that they did not originally prefer. More specifically, existing discussions tend to emphasize measurable academic or educational outcomes, leaving less clear how students themselves experience, interpret, and respond to the continuing mismatch between their original preference and their current program. The gap is therefore not simply the limited study of non-preferred programs, but the limited understanding of the lived processes through which students move from initial resistance or uncertainty toward different forms of adjustment, coping, acceptance, or continued struggle. A phenomenological examination of these experiences can extend existing research by showing how students make meaning of an academic path they did not initially choose and how their responses may differ across individuals. In particular, there is a need to understand how students experience the transition from an expected academic path to a different one, how they respond to the difficulties that arise, and how they gradually make sense of their circumstances. Looking closely at these experiences can provide a more complete understanding of what happens when students continue their college education despite a mismatch between their initial preferences and their present programs.

Understanding these experiences is also important because students may respond to an unpreferred program in different ways. Some may experience uncertainty, reduced motivation, or difficulty adjusting, while others may find support, develop new interests, or discover value in aspects of their current program. Their experiences may therefore involve not only difficulty but also adjustment, reflection, and personal growth. Examining these experiences can provide useful insights for educators, academic advisers, student support personnel, and higher education institutions in understanding how students navigate academic paths that differ from their original choices. In this context, the inquiry is guided by the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of students who are enrolled in programs they did not originally prefer?
2. How do these students cope with the challenges of pursuing a non-preferred program?

LITERATURE REVIEW

College life is often viewed as a critical period of transition where students begin to shape their academic, personal, and professional identities. Within this transition, the choice of a college course plays an important role because it is connected to students' interests, strengths, sense of purpose, daily academic experiences, and future goals. When students enter programs that align with their interests and abilities, they are more likely to experience greater engagement and a stronger sense of belonging in the academic environment (Galotti & Umscheid, 2019). Course selection, therefore, is not simply an academic decision but an important part of how students understand and pursue their goals during college.

The significance of course choice is closely related to students' motivation and satisfaction with their studies. When students perceive that their program reflects their own decisions, they tend to develop a stronger sense of ownership, which can support commitment, persistence, and continued effort despite academic demands. Personal choice may also contribute to positive experiences such as confidence, enthusiasm, and satisfaction with learning (Dag-um et al., 2025a; Dag-um et al., 2025b; Sumayang, 2025). These findings suggest that having a sense of control over one's academic direction can influence not only what students study but also how they engage with their studies.

However, students do not always have full control over their course selection. Academic cut-offs, limited program availability, financial considerations, and other external circumstances may restrict their options and lead them to enroll in programs that were not part of their original plans. Such circumstances may weaken students' initial motivation and contribute to frustration or disengagement, particularly when the chosen program does not correspond with their interests or expectations (Campbell, 2019). Motivation, however, is not necessarily fixed. Students may gradually develop new sources of motivation when they receive support, recognize value in their studies, or redefine their personal and academic goals (Abaron et al., 2025).

These changes are particularly relevant to students enrolled in non-preferred courses, whose experiences may involve emotional, academic, and social adjustment. Students may initially experience disappointment, self-doubt, uncertainty, or difficulty accepting their new academic situation, which can influence their confidence and academic performance (Campbell, 2019; Maloshonok & Terentev, 2017; Pediongco & Calaguas, 2025; Wyness, 2023). Adjustment therefore involves more than simply remaining in a program; it may require students to manage unmet expectations while learning to respond to unfamiliar academic demands.

As students move through this process, they may develop ways of coping that help them remain engaged and gradually make sense of their situation. Seeking support from peers, family members, and instructors, changing one's perspective, and focusing on personal growth may help students respond to the difficulties associated with a non-preferred program. Some students may eventually recognize new interests, skills, and strengths within a path they did not originally choose (Rachmawati et al., 2024). Thus, the literature presents course choice, motivation, and adjustment as connected aspects of the college experience: the degree of personal choice may shape students' initial motivation, while their subsequent experiences and coping processes may influence how they adapt to and find value in an unexpected academic path.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study draws on Self-Determination Theory and Student Development Theory to understand the experiences of students enrolled in programs they did not originally prefer. Self-Determination Theory (Adams et al., 2017) emphasizes the psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness as important conditions for motivation and well-being. This theory is particularly relevant to the present study because students in non-preferred programs may have experienced limited autonomy in their initial course selection due to circumstances such as program availability, financial considerations, admission requirements, or

delayed decisions. Their experiences may also involve questions about competence as they encounter unfamiliar academic demands and relatedness as they seek support from peers, family, and instructors. Examining these dimensions helps explain how students respond to limited choice, changes in motivation, and the development of new ways of engaging with their current programs.

Student Development Theory (Jones & Stewart, 2016) provides a complementary perspective by focusing on students' personal and social growth throughout their college experience. This perspective is applicable because enrollment in a non-preferred program may challenge students' original expectations, sense of direction, and understanding of themselves. As they encounter academic difficulties, adjust to their programs, receive support, and develop new perspectives, students may experience changes in how they understand their abilities, goals, and future possibilities. The theory therefore helps situate their experiences within the broader developmental process that occurs during college rather than viewing adjustment only as a response to academic difficulty.

Together, the two theories provide complementary lenses for understanding the phenomenon. Self-Determination Theory helps explain how students' psychological needs and motivation are affected when their original academic choices are constrained, while Student Development Theory helps explain how they adapt, develop, and make meaning of their experiences over time. Their combined use is particularly appropriate for examining students who initially experience uncertainty, low motivation, or difficulty accepting a non-preferred program but may later develop coping strategies, receive support, discover new interests, and gain a stronger sense of direction. Thus, the framework connects the immediate psychological experience of being in an unchosen program with the broader process of adjustment and personal development that may emerge throughout the students' college journey.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Locale

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design (Adeniran & Tayo-Ladega, 2024) to examine how students experience and make sense of being enrolled in programs that were not their original preference. A phenomenological approach was appropriate because the inquiry focused on the participants' first-hand experiences, including their initial reactions, difficulties in adjusting, changes in motivation, coping processes, and developing perceptions of their current programs. Rather than measuring the extent of these experiences, the approach allowed the researchers to examine how participants understood and gave meaning to an academic path that differed from what they had initially intended. The study was conducted at San Isidro College, where the participants' personal narratives served as the primary source of data.

Sampling Method and Participants

The study used criterion sampling to select participants who met specific conditions relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. The inclusion criteria were: (1) the individual must be a college student enrolled at San Isidro College during the academic year 2025–2026; (2) the student must be enrolled in a program they did not primarily prefer; and (3) the student must be in either their third or fourth year of study. These criteria ensured that the participants had direct experience with the phenomenon and sufficient time in college to reflect on their academic journeys. Five participants who met these criteria were included in the study. Five participants were included because phenomenological inquiry prioritizes depth and richness of individual lived experiences rather than a large sample size. The participants met the established criteria and provided detailed accounts of their experiences in non-preferred programs, allowing the researchers to examine commonalities and differences across cases.

Table 1. Demographic profile of the participants

Participant	Sex	Age	Current Program	Preferred Program
P-1	Male	20	Information Technology	Architecture
P-2	Male	19	Nursing	Criminology
P-3	Male	18	Civil Engineering	Architecture
P-4	Female	19	Philosophy	Political Science
P-5	Female	22	Mathematic Education	Mathematics

As shown in **Table 1**, the participants differed in their preferred and current programs, although the degree of proximity between the two varied. P-3 had the closest program pairing, with Civil Engineering and Architecture sharing a substantial connection in the built-environment and design fields. P-5 also had closely related programs, as Mathematics Education and Mathematics both center on mathematics, although they differ in their primary professional orientation. P-1's Information Technology and Architecture share some areas related to technology, design, and digital applications but represent distinct academic fields. P-4's Philosophy and Political Science are both within the humanities and social sciences but differ in their disciplinary focus, while P-2's Nursing and Criminology represent more distinct fields with limited direct academic overlap. This variation in program proximity provided different contexts through which participants experienced being placed in a program outside their original preference.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data were gathered through a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide developed to elicit participants' experiences of being enrolled in non-preferred programs. The guide was organized around the participants' background, lived experiences in their current programs, challenges and adjustments, and coping and meaning-making. It was validated by three experts in the field and obtained a Content Validity Index (CVI) of 0.93, indicating a high level of agreement regarding the relevance and clarity of the interview guide. This expert review supported the appropriateness of the interview guide, while the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings was established through credibility, dependability, and confirmability. The semi-structured format provided a consistent focus across participants while allowing the researchers to follow the flow and depth of their individual experiences.

Before each interview, the researchers explained the purpose and nature of the study, the interview process, and the expected duration. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without consequences. Informed consent was secured before data collection. Individual face-to-face interviews lasted approximately twenty to forty minutes and were audio-recorded with the participants' permission to preserve the accuracy and completeness of their statements. The interviews were conducted respectfully to allow participants to describe their experiences and reflections in their own words, after which the recorded data were used for the subsequent phenomenological analysis.

The adequacy of the data was determined through data saturation, which was reached when the interviews no longer generated substantially new experiences, meanings, or coping patterns relevant to the research questions. Qualitative trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was supported by obtaining detailed first-hand accounts through individual interviews; dependability was strengthened through the consistent use of the semi-structured interview guide and systematic analysis of the interview data; and confirmability was supported by grounding the findings in the participants' recorded statements and maintaining the connection between the raw data, emerging themes, and interpretations.

Data Treatment

The responses collected were analyzed using Colaizzi's Method (Praveena & Sasikumar, 2021), a systematic approach for interpreting phenomenological data. This method involves organizing participants' descriptions, extracting significant statements, and formulating meanings that reflect their experiences. The process also includes identifying themes and integrating them into an overall description of the phenomenon, ensuring that the essence of the participants' perspectives is preserved.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussion present a picture of how students make sense of being enrolled in programs that were not their initial choice. The findings are drawn from their shared experiences and reflect how students respond to academic demands, social environments, and personal expectations. Together, these results provide a grounded understanding of how meaning, motivation, and adjustment develop within the context of an unchosen academic path.

Experiences of Students in Pursuing Their Non-Preferred Course

The discussion on students' experiences reflects how they gradually understand and reinterpret their situation in a non-preferred course. Their accounts show an evolving view shaped by daily academic tasks, interactions with peers and teachers, and personal reflections. These experiences reveal how students begin to find value, direction, and personal growth despite initial hesitation or uncertainty.

External Circumstances Shaping Course Placement

The results show that students' course placement was strongly shaped by external conditions beyond their personal preferences. As shared by the students:

"The university where I was planning to go did not have the course that I wanted... money problems and the popularity of technology-related jobs also influenced my decision." [P1]

"My slot was given to others because I enrolled late... my second option was taking education since it was affordable." [P2]

"...is not available at my current school... it would be difficult for me to study elsewhere." [P3]

"A delayed decision." [P4]

"I was enrolled in my first program... but online class is not for me... I transferred and took a different course." [P5]

The statements included limited program availability in nearby institutions, financial constraints, late enrollment, and changes in learning delivery that did not suit their needs. These circumstances influenced students to choose alternative programs that were more accessible, affordable, or feasible given their situation. The findings indicate that course decisions were often the result of practical considerations rather than personal choice, highlighting how structural and situational factors guided students' educational paths.

These results suggest that students' experiences in non-preferred courses are closely linked to factors outside their control, which frame how they enter higher education. Such conditions affect how students initially position themselves within their programs, shaping expectations and early engagement. Understanding these realities emphasizes the importance of institutional awareness of access, affordability, and timing, as these

elements directly affect students' entry points and adjustment experiences in college (Abaron et al., 2025; Dagum et al., 2025b; Pediongco & Calaguas, 2025; Sumayang, 2025).

Emotional Turbulence Upon Entering a Non-Preferred Program

The results show that entering a non-preferred program was accompanied by emotional strain and uncertainty. As shared by the students:

"I was in a state of confusion and lacked the drive to do my studies... I would often pit my situation against those of students who were lucky enough to study their dream courses." [P1]

"I felt excited but nervous because nursing wasn't my first choice... the first few months were full of adjustments." [P2]

"It was difficult because I did not want to take this course; my mind and emotions were set on Architecture." [P3]

"Nervous, uncertain, afraid and doubts." [P4]

"The adjustment... is kinda hard... it's my first time encountering the subject." [P5]

Students described feelings of confusion, self-doubt, nervousness, and difficulty adjusting, particularly during the early months. These emotions were tied to comparisons with peers, unfamiliar subject matter, and the gap between their original aspirations and their current academic setting. The results show that emotional responses were a common and shared experience during this phase of adjustment.

These emotional challenges imply that students' motivation and sense of direction may initially be unsettled when pursuing a program they did not originally choose. The presence of mixed emotions reflects the struggle to align personal goals with current academic realities. Recognizing this emotional turbulence is important, as it influences how students cope, persist, and begin to engage meaningfully with their studies during the adjustment period (Campbell et al., 2019; Maloshonok & Terentev, 2017; Sumayang, 2025; Wyness, 2023).

Academic and Personal Challenges Affecting Adjustment

The results show that students faced both academic and personal challenges that affected their adjustment to non-preferred programs. As shared by the students:

"I was weak at programming... I had no prior knowledge... I had to deal with a lack of confidence." [P1]

"Nursing is really demanding... there were times I doubted myself and felt tired." [P2]

"The challenge... was to accept and learn to love the program I was enrolled in." [P3]

"Time management for extracurricular and academic learning." [P4]

"My backlogs... academically my grades... I will be suggested to shift to another course." [P5]

These challenges included gaps in prior knowledge, demanding coursework, time management difficulties, and concerns about academic performance. Some students also struggled with confidence and acceptance of their program, which added to the difficulty of meeting academic expectations. The findings show that these challenges were ongoing and directly connected to students' daily academic experiences.

These challenges highlight the need for students to develop new skills, strategies, and self-understanding as they navigate unfamiliar academic demands. The difficulties encountered suggest that adjustment is not immediate but requires continuous effort and support. Addressing these challenges is essential to help students remain engaged and prevent further academic strain as they progress in their programs (Abaron et al., 2025; Pediongco & Calaguas, 2025; Sumayang, 2025).

Gradual Development of Acceptance and Motivation

Over time, the results show a gradual shift toward acceptance and renewed motivation among students. As shared by the students:

"I gradually started viewing my course as a means to equip myself with different skills... this transformation made me more goal-oriented." [P1]

"As time went by, I learned to appreciate it... caring for people made me more motivated." [P2]

"The coping strategy... was to love and accept it, which helped me focus on gaining knowledge." [P3]

"Eager to explore more and learning to love my course." [P4]

"My mindset is that it doesn't matter what course as long as I will graduate and I have a degree." [P5]

Many participants began to view their programs as opportunities to gain skills, develop discipline, and move toward long-term goals such as graduation. This change reflected a growing willingness to engage with coursework, explore learning opportunities, and redefine success beyond their initial course preference. However, the participants did not experience acceptance in the same way. P5, in particular, appeared to develop more instrumental engagement, remaining committed to completing the degree despite continuing difficulties in adapting to the program and developing a strong personal connection with it. This suggests that academic participation and persistence do not necessarily indicate that a student has fully internalized the professional identity associated with the current program. This pattern may reflect motivation that is more strongly connected to external or personally valued outcomes, such as graduation, than to intrinsic interest or a fully internalized identification with the program. The experience may also indicate that adjustment in academic behavior can occur before students develop a clearer sense of identity and direction within their chosen field. Thus, while acceptance may emerge through reflection and sustained experience, the findings also show that adaptation can remain partial when continued engagement is driven primarily by the goal of completing the degree.

This gradual development suggests that students are capable of adapting their perspectives when given time and space to adjust. The shift toward acceptance and motivation reflects personal growth and the ability to find meaning within current circumstances. These results underscore the importance of supporting students throughout this transition, as continued engagement can help transform initial reluctance into purposeful participation in their academic journey (Abaron et al., 2025; Galotti & Umscheid, 2019; Pediongco & Calaguas, 2025; Sumayang, 2025).

Support Systems as a Key Source of Strength

The results show that support systems played a central role in helping students cope with the demands of pursuing a non-preferred course. As shared by the students:

"Fellow students and teachers... were always willing to help me when I found the lesson difficult." [P1]

"I talked to my classmates and family when I felt stressed and that helped me a lot." [P2]

"My fellow math majors... helping each other instead of being competitive." [P5]

Students described receiving help from classmates, teachers, and family members, especially during moments of academic difficulty and emotional stress. This support was expressed through shared learning, open communication, and a cooperative environment where students helped one another rather than competing. Such experiences highlight how access to both academic and personal support allowed students to manage challenges more effectively and remain engaged despite initial difficulties with their course choice.

These results suggest that supportive relationships serve as a key source of strength in sustaining students' persistence and adjustment. The presence of peers and mentors who offer guidance and encouragement appears to ease feelings of stress and isolation, allowing students to continue despite misalignment with their original interests. This emphasizes the importance of nurturing environments that promote cooperation and open support, as these conditions help students develop confidence and resilience while navigating a non-preferred academic path (Abaron et al., 2025; Rachmawati et al., 2024; Pediongco & Calaguas, 2025; Sumayang, 2025).

Positive Reframing and Meaning-Making

The results show that students actively engaged in positive reframing and meaning-making as they adjusted to their non-preferred course. As shared by the students:

"I put special emphasis on locating the intersections between my passion and the course... I liked assignments involving designing." [P1]

"I realized there is also a lot of fun in it." [P3]

"Stay positive... accepting the environment and people." [P4]

"By time passes you will appreciate the course." [P5]

Students shared how they began to identify aspects of their courses that aligned with their interests, such as creative tasks or enjoyable activities, and gradually developed a more accepting outlook. However, the nature of this adjustment differed across participants. P1 and P3 showed a more integrative form of adaptation, as they were able to connect aspects of their current programs with their interests, recognize value in what they were learning, and develop a more positive relationship with their academic path. This suggests movement beyond simply remaining in the program toward a greater sense of meaning and personal alignment. Such experiences may reflect greater internalization of the reasons for engaging with the program, particularly when students find activities that support their sense of competence and personal relevance. In contrast, P4 and P5 appeared to demonstrate a more functional form of adaptation, in which acceptance and continued participation were supported more by practical adjustment and the need to manage the demands of the program than by a strong personal identification with it. Their experiences indicate that successful adjustment in academic behavior does not necessarily mean that the program has become fully integrated into the student's personal interests or identity. Thus, adaptation among students in non-preferred programs may range from finding genuine personal meaning in the new path to learning how to function effectively within circumstances that remain less personally preferred.

The implications of these findings suggest that positive reframing helps students sustain motivation and emotional balance while pursuing a course they did not initially choose. By redefining their experiences and finding personal meaning, students were able to reduce resistance and increase engagement. This process allowed them to view their academic journey as flexible and evolving, supporting continued participation and

openness to learning despite initial reluctance (Abaron et al., 2025; Campbell et al., 2019; Pediongco & Calaguas, 2025; Sumayang, 2025).

Transformation and Personal Growth

The results show that pursuing a non-preferred course led to noticeable transformation and personal growth among students. As shared by the students:

“My attitude... was transformed. I thought IT was only technical, but now I see it requires creativity and problem-solving.” [P1]

“Now I see it’s a beautiful and fulfilling profession.” [P2]

“It taught me to reflect and open myself... to get out of my comfort zone.” [P4]

“I learned to love my course even though I’m not an outgoing person.” [P5]

Students described changes in their attitudes, noting a deeper appreciation for the skills, creativity, and value embedded in their field of study. They also reflected on becoming more open-minded, stepping outside their comfort zones, and developing a stronger sense of self in relation to their academic identity. These experiences show how continued exposure and reflection contributed to a shift from resistance to acceptance.

These results imply that engagement with a non-preferred course can become a meaningful source of personal development. As students adjusted their perspectives, they gained new insights about themselves and their abilities, leading to increased confidence and fulfillment. This transformation highlights how academic experiences, even when initially undesired, can support growth by encouraging reflection, adaptability, and self-acceptance (Abaron et al., 2025; Dag-um et al., 2025a; Pediongco & Calaguas, 2025; Sumayang, 2025).

Synthesizing these points, the results show that students’ experiences in pursuing a non-preferred course were shaped by strong support systems, positive reframing, and personal transformation. Support from peers, teachers, and family helped students manage challenges, while meaning-making allowed them to find value in their academic experiences. Over time, these processes contributed to changes in attitude and personal growth, demonstrating how students adapted, remained engaged, and developed a deeper appreciation for their course despite initial hesitation.

Coping with the Challenges of Pursuing a Non-Preferred Course

The discussion on coping focuses on how students respond to the challenges they encounter as they continue in their programs. Their experiences highlight practical and emotional ways of managing stress, maintaining motivation, and adjusting to academic routines. These coping patterns show how students actively work toward balance and stability while continuing their studies in a course they did not originally choose.

Reframing Mindset and Practicing Acceptance

The results show that students coped with pursuing a non-preferred course by reframing their mindset and practicing acceptance. As shared by the students:

“Success depends more on effort than preference... I gradually started viewing my course as a means to equip myself with skills.” [P1]

“As time went by, I learned to appreciate it... it made me more motivated.” [P2]

“The coping strategy I used... was to love and accept it.” [P3]

“Learning to love my course.” [P4]

“Learn to love the course even though it’s not your choice.” [P5]

Students described a gradual shift from focusing on preference to recognizing effort, skill development, and personal responsibility as more important to success. Over time, the course was viewed less as a limitation and more as an opportunity to grow and prepare for future goals. This process of acceptance was expressed through learning to appreciate the course and choosing to embrace it despite it not being their original choice. These accounts indicate that mindset changes were not immediate but developed through continued engagement and reflection.

The findings suggest that reframing and acceptance helped students remain engaged and motivated in their academic journey. By choosing to accept their situation, students reduced resistance and emotional strain, allowing them to focus on learning and self-improvement. This coping approach supported emotional adjustment and sustained effort, showing that acceptance can serve as a practical strategy for managing challenges linked to unmet preferences in academic pathways (Dag-um et al., 2025b; Galotti & Umscheid, 2019; Rachmawati et al., 2024; Sumayang, 2025).

Strengthening Motivation Through Personal Goals and Faith

The results show that students strengthened their motivation by grounding their efforts in personal goals and faith. As shared by the students:

“I put special emphasis on locating the intersections between my passion and the course.” [P1]

“I stayed positive... prayed a lot and asked God for strength.” [P2]

“Faith, trust in God’s plan... unexpected changes may be a better fit.” [P4]

“My mindset is that it doesn’t matter what course as long as I will graduate.” [P5]

Students described several ways of sustaining their engagement, including connecting course tasks with their interests, maintaining a positive outlook toward graduation, and drawing strength from personal beliefs. These sources of motivation differed across participants. For some, finding connections between their existing interests and the demands of the current program provided a way to regain a sense of personal choice and relevance. For others, the goal of completing the degree served as a practical reason to persist even when the program remained difficult or was not originally preferred. Faith and trust in a broader purpose also provided emotional support during moments of doubt. The responses suggest that students can strengthen their motivation by finding personally meaningful reasons for continuing, even when their original choice is no longer possible. The processes also reflect an ongoing effort to clarify goals, understand personal capabilities, and develop a sense of direction within an unexpected academic path. The findings therefore show that coping involved not only managing difficulties but also gradually developing reasons that made continued participation meaningful.

The implications of these findings show that motivation rooted in personal goals and belief systems can help students persist despite challenges. When students connected their studies to long-term aims or a sense of purpose, they were better able to manage stress and remain committed. This form of motivation supported consistency and resilience, helping students continue their academic journey even when initial interest was limited (Dag-um et al., 2025b; Rachmawati et al., 2024; Pediongco & Calaguas, 2025; Sumayang, 2025).

Building Support Networks for Encouragement

The results show that building support networks was an important coping strategy for students pursuing a non-preferred course. As shared by the students:

"Fellow students and teachers... were always willing to help me when I found the lesson difficult." [P1]

"I talked to my classmates and family when I felt stressed and that helped me a lot." [P2]

"My fellow math majors... instead of being competitive they are helping each other." [P5]

Students described receiving help from classmates, teachers, and family members during times of academic difficulty and emotional stress. These support networks were characterized by shared learning, open communication, and a cooperative environment rather than competition. Such interactions provided reassurance and practical assistance, making challenges more manageable.

These results imply that encouragement from support networks plays a key role in sustaining students' adjustment and persistence. Access to supportive peers and mentors helped reduce feelings of isolation and stress, reinforcing students' confidence and willingness to continue. This highlights the value of social connections in helping students cope with academic challenges, particularly when navigating a course that was not their first choice (Abaron et al., 2025; Rachmawati et al., 2024; Pediongco & Calaguas, 2025; Sumayang, 2025).

Developing Academic and Personal Adjustment Strategies

The results show that students developed both academic and personal adjustment strategies to cope with pursuing a non-preferred course. As shared by the students:

"I extended the technological side of the creative field... mainly the internet and multimedia." [P1]

"I slowly managed my time and got used to the routine." [P2]

"If one manages time effectively... setbacks will be minimal." [P3]

"Staying prepared in any circumstances and accepting the environment." [P4]

Students described using available resources, such as digital tools and online platforms, to connect course demands with their interests and strengths. Others highlighted the gradual process of learning to manage time, follow daily routines, and prepare for academic tasks. These strategies demonstrate active problem-solving and show that students were able to adjust their behaviors to meet the demands of their programs. However, behavioral adjustment should not automatically be interpreted as full psychological acceptance of the program. For P4 and P5, practical strategies such as preparation, routine, and persistence appeared to support continued participation even when their connection with the program was not necessarily based on strong personal interest. This distinction is important because adaptation can occur at the level of academic functioning without necessarily involving deeper internalization of the program as part of one's personal or professional identity. The findings suggest that students may remain engaged for personally valued or practical reasons while still experiencing limited alignment with their original interests. The participants' accounts therefore indicate that coping strategies can help students function within a non-preferred program, but effective functioning and deeper acceptance are not necessarily the same process.

The findings suggest that these adjustment strategies supported students' capacity to remain engaged and function effectively in their studies. By developing routines, improving time management, and using practical tools, students reduced the impact of academic difficulties and daily stress. This indicates that learning to adapt through planning and preparation helped students gain a sense of control, which supported both academic performance and personal adjustment over time (Abaron et al., 2025; Rachmawati et al., 2024; Pediongco & Calaguas, 2025; Sumayang, 2025).

Drawing Strength from Purpose and Responsibility

The results show that students drew strength from a sense of purpose and responsibility as they navigated their non-preferred course. As shared by the students:

"I wanted to do well because I didn't want to disappoint my brother who was supporting me." [P2]

"It taught me to reflect and get out of my comfort zone." [P4]

"I want to pursue my course until I graduate." [P5]

Students expressed motivation that came from personal commitments, such as not wanting to disappoint family members, as well as from a growing willingness to reflect and move beyond their comfort zones. Others emphasized a clear intention to continue their studies until completion, showing a strong sense of responsibility toward their educational path. These responses highlight how purpose shaped students' attitudes and persistence.

The findings imply that purpose and responsibility played a key role in sustaining students' effort despite challenges. When students connected their studies to personal obligations or long-term goals, they were better able to endure difficulties and remain focused. This sense of responsibility encouraged persistence and self-reflection, supporting continued engagement even when the course did not align with initial preferences (Abaron et al., 2025; Rachmawati et al., 2024; Pediongco & Calaguas, 2025; Sumayang, 2025).

Synthesizing these points, the results show that coping with a non-preferred course involved a combination of mindset shifts, motivation, support, and practical adjustment strategies. Students learned to accept their situation, draw strength from personal goals and responsibilities, seek encouragement from others, and develop effective routines and study habits. Together, these approaches allowed students to manage academic demands and emotional challenges in a more balanced way, showing a gradual process of adjustment rather than immediate change.

Synthesis

Considering all factors, the findings reveal that students did not follow a single pattern of adjustment to their non-preferred programs. Their experiences can be understood through three broad patterns of adaptation. P1 and P3 showed a more integrative pattern, as they gradually found connections between their interests and their current programs, developed greater appreciation for what they were learning, and came to view their circumstances as opportunities for growth. Their adjustment involved not only managing academic demands but also making personal meaning from an academic path they had not originally chosen. P2 reflected a struggling-but-coping pattern, as the demands of the program and the pressure associated with meeting expectations initially created uncertainty and difficulty, but support from family and classmates, personal goals, prayer, and a changing appreciation of the profession helped sustain engagement. P4 and P5 showed a more functional or instrumental pattern of adaptation. Both learned to manage the practical demands of their programs and continued moving toward their academic goals, but their accounts suggest that behavioral adjustment and persistence did not necessarily correspond to the same level of personal identification with the program.

A cross-participant comparison further shows that the students differed systematically in both the source and depth of their adjustment. The initial circumstances that placed them in non-preferred programs varied, including program availability, financial considerations, delayed decisions, transfer circumstances, and the loss of an opportunity to enter a preferred program. Despite these differences, a common pattern was evident: initial uncertainty or resistance was followed by efforts to cope with the realities of the current program. What differed was how students eventually related to that path. Some moved toward personal alignment and

meaning-making by discovering aspects of the program that connected with their interests, while others remained engaged mainly because of practical goals such as completing the degree, managing academic responsibilities, or meeting expectations. Support from peers, family, and instructors appeared across these experiences, but its role also varied, functioning for some as encouragement for deeper engagement and for others as assistance in sustaining participation during difficult periods.

These findings suggest that adjustment can be understood as a set of possible trajectories rather than a uniform process. One trajectory moves from initial resistance toward integration, in which students gradually develop personal meaning and stronger alignment with their current program. A second involves continued struggle accompanied by coping, where students experience persistent difficulties but remain engaged through support, personal goals, and adaptive strategies. A third reflects functional or instrumental adaptation, where students learn to meet academic demands and persist toward completion without necessarily developing the same degree of personal identification with the program. The trajectories are not necessarily fixed or mutually exclusive, and students may move between them as their circumstances and perspectives change. This typological view provides a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon by showing that remaining in a non-preferred program can result in different forms of adjustment, ranging from deeper integration to practical persistence.

CONCLUSION

The findings show that students enrolled in non-preferred programs experienced adjustment as an evolving process rather than a single transition from difficulty to acceptance. Their experiences differed in the depth and nature of this adjustment. P1 and P3 demonstrated more integrative adaptation, finding personal meaning and connections between their interests and current programs. P2 reflected continued struggle accompanied by coping through support, personal goals, and growing appreciation of the program. P4 and P5 showed more functional or instrumental adaptation, maintaining participation through practical adjustment and academic goals without the same level of personal identification with their programs.

The study's contribution to existing literature lies in showing that adjustment to a non-preferred program is not a uniform outcome and should not be understood simply as either successful or unsuccessful adaptation. Instead, students may follow different trajectories, ranging from personal integration and meaning-making to continued struggle or practical persistence. This distinction adds a more nuanced understanding of students' lived experiences by showing that remaining engaged in a program does not necessarily mean that the program has been fully internalized as part of the student's interests or developing identity.

LIMITATIONS

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The findings are based on a small group of participants, which limits the ability to represent the experiences of all students enrolled in non-preferred programs. Data were gathered through self-reported interviews, which may be influenced by personal reflection, recall, or the willingness of participants to openly share their experiences. In addition, the study focused on experiences at a single point in time, making it difficult to capture how perceptions and coping strategies may continue to change throughout the students' academic journey. These factors suggest that the results should be understood as context-specific rather than broadly generalizable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that educational institutions strengthen support systems for students enrolled in non-preferred programs by promoting peer connection, accessible academic guidance, and positive learning

environments. Programs that encourage reflection, flexible learning strategies, and supportive faculty engagement may help students manage adjustment more effectively. The findings also suggest the value of early orientation and advising initiatives that acknowledge students' initial difficulties while guiding them toward practical coping approaches that foster motivation and persistence.

Future studies may build on these findings by including a larger and more diverse group of participants from different institutions and academic fields. Longitudinal research could examine how students' attitudes, motivation, and coping strategies develop over time as they progress in their programs. Additional studies may also explore specific institutional practices, learning tools, or support interventions that help students adjust to non-preferred programs, allowing for a deeper understanding of what strategies are most effective in promoting sustained engagement and personal growth.

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