

Gauging the Readiness, Challenges, and Adaptation Practices Among First Year Education Students

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ABSTRACT: College readiness is a critical factor in ensuring student success during the transition from secondary to higher education. It encompasses academic preparedness, personal adjustment, and emotional resilience, which collectively shape students' ability to persist in college. This study aimed to assess the academic, personal, and emotional readiness of first-year education students, identify the challenges they encountered, and examine the adaptation practices and strategies they employed. Using a qualitative design, reflections from 30 first-year education students were analyzed through thematic analysis to capture their lived experiences of readiness, struggles, and coping practices.

The findings revealed that students demonstrated academic readiness through proactive practices such as developing study habits, advanced reading, and course-related research. Personal readiness was expressed through independence, decision-making, financial planning, and lifestyle adjustments, while emotional readiness emerged through resilience, self-awareness, and reliance on spirituality, though varied levels of preparation were observed. Despite these strengths, students faced interconnected challenges, including heavy academic workload, time management difficulties, financial constraints, commuting burdens, and emotional struggles related to social adjustment and well-being. To navigate these, students employed strategies such as effective time management, stress management, seeking peer and family support, drawing motivation from faith and personal goals, adopting consistent study habits, and maintaining work-life balance. These findings suggest that readiness and adaptation are multidimensional processes that require holistic institutional support in academic, emotional, social, and financial, to foster resilience, persistence, and long-term success among first-year education students.

KEYWORDS: College Readiness, First-Year Education Students, Adaptation Strategies, Challenges

INTRODUCTION

Education has been regarded as a pathway to enhance social mobility, transforming individuals within society (Bereketeab, 2020), and contributing to the economic prosperity of a nation (Kingdom and Maekae, 2013). It also serves as a tool for empowering individuals to actively participate as productive members in a diverse and pluralistic global community (Vecaldo, et. al., 2020), however, the transition from high school to post-secondary education is often difficult for students.

College readiness generally refers to the ability of high school graduates to be admitted to college and to succeed in foundation courses without remediation. It focuses on the knowledge and skills essential to successfully pursue college (Baber, et. al., 2020). The transition to university often involves adapting to a new setting that presents distinct academic and personal challenges. From an academic perspective, there is a widely acknowledged distinction between university and high school, notably, there is a heightened expectation of independence, with a shift in responsibility from external sources to internal ones (Wasylikiw, 2015). In high school, where teachers typically provide reminders, guidance, and structure for learning, whereas university places the responsibility on students to take charge of their responsibilities and direction (Royster, 2015). Coupled with larger classrooms, multiple instructors, and a more demanding workload, students encounter notable differences in the academic environment at university compared to their experiences in high school, thus learning readiness is considered as a supporting factor in the students' academic resilience. College readiness involves the capability of high school graduates to be admitted to college and succeed in foundational courses without requiring remediation, emphasizing the essential knowledge and skills for a successful pursuit of higher education (Conley, 2013; Tinto, 2017). It is a multifaceted construct that includes cognitive strategies, content knowledge, learning skills, and transition knowledge necessary for navigating higher education (Conley, 2014). The transition from secondary school to university represents a critical and often transformative phase in students' lives, marked by new academic

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challenges, increased independence, and heightened expectations (Farruggia, et al., 2018; Parker, et al., 2017). This period often requires students to adjust to different teaching styles, heavier workloads, and more rigorous academic demands (Stallman, Ohan, and Chiera, 2019).

For many freshmen students, this transition can be both exciting and daunting as they navigate the complex landscape of higher education. While the opportunity to pursue higher learning fosters autonomy and identity development, it is also associated with stress, anxiety, and adjustment difficulties (Cabras and Mondo, 2023; Turner, Holdsworth, and Scott-Young, 2021). The extent to which these students are prepared for the academic, social, and personal demands of university life significantly influences their overall success and well-being during this critical period (Credé and Phillips, 2017; Truong, Garvey, and Love, 2022).

In the Philippines, the assessment of preparedness among students across crucial grade levels is conducted in accordance with the Policy Guidelines on the National Assessment of Student Learning for the K to 12 Basic Education Program (Department of Education, 2016). Specifically, for Senior High School (SHS) students, a Grade 12 exit assessment is implemented to ascertain their alignment with the learning standards outlined in the SHS curriculum. Additionally, before transitioning to SHS, Grade 9 students undergo a career assessment to evaluate their aptitudes and occupational interests, providing guidance for future career choices. However, there is uncertainty regarding whether these evaluations effectively measure the college readiness of K to 12 graduates in the Philippines (Balagtas, et. al., 2019).

Academic resilience is an important part to successfully meet academic challenges and encouraging student motivation and success, and students who show hard work can solve problems, see difficulties as opportunities, adjust learning methods, look for other learning sources, and avoid negative responses (Mallick and Kaur, 2016; Cassidy, 2016). These behaviors are often perceived as signs that show academic resilience, but due to changes in learning methods brought by the pandemic in schools, academic resilience is an important thing that students need to stay connected to the learning processes and methods in achieving study success.

While challenges are evident, students' readiness and effective adaptation strategies, along with institutional support, play pivotal roles in their overall success and well-being during this critical period. Understanding the factors that contribute to college readiness and the ability of university students to adapt during this transition is essential for supporting their academic success and personal growth. Furthermore, by identifying the challenges faced by freshmen and examining the skills and practices that facilitate their adjustment, educators and institutions can better equip students for the demands of higher education, ultimately enhancing their overall university experience and long-term success.

Research Objectives

1. Assess the academic, personal, and emotional readiness of first-year education students;
2. Identify the challenges that the first-year education students have encountered; and
3. Examine the adaptation practices and strategies employed by first-year education students to navigate the challenges that they have encountered.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Using the Qualitative Research Approach particularly the Descriptive Research Design, the researcher gathered the data through a researcher-made open-ended questionnaire. The respondents were the purposively selected thirty (30) first year Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSEd), Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEEd), and Bachelor of Physical Education (BPED) students from the College of Education (CEd).

The questionnaire had undergone face and content validation by Language and Professional Education experts to ensure the clarity and conciseness of the questions. The transcripts of the data collected were transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed to determine the academic, personal, and emotional readiness of first-year education, identify the challenges that the first-year education students have encountered, and examine the adaptation practices and strategies employed by first-year education students to navigate the challenges that they have encountered.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

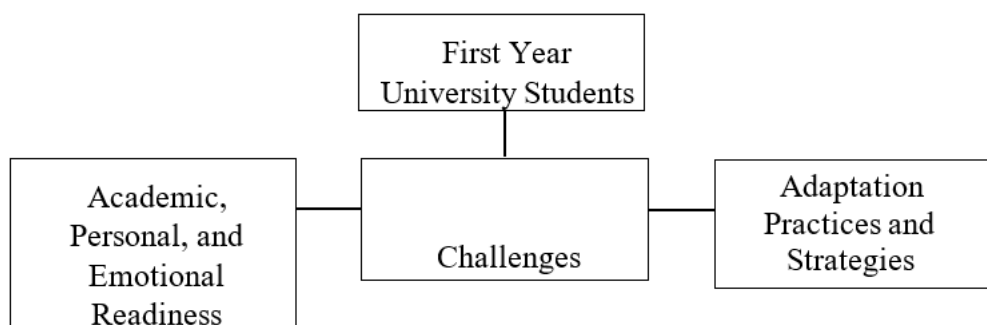


Figure 1. Research Paradigm

The conceptual framework for the study, "Gauging the Readiness, Challenges, and Adaptation Practices among First Year Education Students," is structured to investigate the academic, personal, and emotional preparedness of first-year education students, the challenges they encounter, and the adaptation practices they employ. Furthermore, the study aims to provide a holistic understanding of the readiness, challenges, and adaptation practices among first-year education students to inform educational institutions and policymakers in developing targeted interventions to enhance the transition experience and support systems for incoming education students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. College Academic, Personal, and Emotional Readiness of First Year Education Students

a. Academic Readiness

The participants demonstrated strong academic readiness by engaging in proactive practices before entering college. They prepared by developing study habits and learning strategies, such as adjusting study routines, organizing schedules, practicing public speaking, and refreshing study skills using online resources.

The transition from senior high school to college marks a significant shift in a student's academic life. To better understand how students prepare for this transition, a set of reflections from 30 participants was analyzed, with a specific focus on their academic readiness. The responses reveal diverse strategies that incoming first-year students adopt to cope with the expected academic demands of higher education.

The first-year students exhibited academic readiness by engaging in proactive practices such as developing study habits, advanced reading of future course materials, and conducting course-related research.

Many students prepared by gathering information from various sources, including college students, graduates, relatives, and online platforms as evident by these sample responses from P1 *"Nag tanong-tanong sa mga kakilala na nag-college at nasa college para mainform ako kung anu-ano ang mga pinag-aaralan sa College of Education"*, while P9 had stated that *"I asked my cousin on what should I expect with my course because he also pursues the program that I am taking."*

Furthermore, several participants reported gathering information from students and graduates (P1, P12, P20), asking advice from cousins or peers in the same program (P4, P9), and researching online about college expectations and course requirements (P6, P10, P19, P20, P18, P11). Others highlighted advanced reading and subject familiarization (P8, P16, P18, P19, P20, P16, P18, P19) and adjusting their study routines or refreshing study skills (P11, P13, P14, P23) as part of their preparation.

These participants showed readiness by conducting course-related research and gathering information from reliable sources asking advice from cousins or current students in the same program, interviewing graduates, researching future subjects, watching educational videos, exploring campus layout, connecting with classmates, and finalizing course and scholarship applications. This data illustrates that academic readiness among first-year college students is not merely about knowing what to expect but it is an active process of researching, planning, and practicing skills that will support their learning journey. The participants' insights reflect a proactive mindset, aiming to reduce the shock of transition and increase their chances of succeeding in the collegiate environment.

These strategies align with the concept that academic readiness is not only about cognitive skills but also about psychosocial and contextual preparedness (Phillips-Berenstein, et al, 2024). Recent studies emphasize that noncognitive factors, such as learning strategies, self-discipline, and mindset—are equally crucial in ensuring student success in college (Green, et al, 2023). Similarly, research in the Philippine context underscores that incoming freshmen demonstrate strong academic behavior

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and contextual awareness when they actively gather information and prepare for the challenges of higher education (Sali, et al, 2024). Moreover, the experiences of transitioning students indicate that early preparation through planning, information gathering, and peer support helps reduce the shock of transition and fosters resilience (Ricks and Warren, 2021; Nuñez, 2023). These practices and strategies had highlighted how first-year students prepared not just academically, but also mentally, to embrace the academic demands and expectations of higher education.

b. Personal Readiness

The data revealed that students exhibited a considerable level of personal readiness as they prepared for independence, lifestyle adjustments, social adaptation, decision-making, and financial planning.

The first-year students prepared themselves personally by focusing on independence, lifestyle changes, social adjustment, decision-making, and financial planning. Students also prepared personally by focusing on independence, lifestyle change, and financial planning. One participant explained, *"I gathered info from different sources for decision-making"* (P1), while another reflected on self-awareness, saying, *"I discovered more about myself and my potential"* (P2). Financial planning was also emphasized, with one noting, *"I saved my allowance because of financial limitations"* (P13). Others focused on lifestyle adjustments, as one shared, *"I prepared to adopt the college lifestyle"* (P14), and another described, *"I bought materials and checked the school website for campus life"* (P21). These students' practices had reflected their readiness to adapt to the personal and social demands of college.

In addition, some students have also engaged in decision-making through gathering information and seeking advice (P2, P3, P5, P12, P17, P22) and finalizing their course choice and future plans (P5, P30). Some highlighted financial readiness such as saving allowances and applying for scholarships (P13, P30). Others prepared for lifestyle and social adjustments, including adopting the college lifestyle, managing transportation, buying supplies, and exploring campus life (P14, P21, P25, P21).

The data indicates that first-year education students exhibited a notable level of personal readiness, particularly in areas of decision-making, financial planning, and lifestyle adjustments. Many students proactively gathered information and sought advice from family and peers regarding course selection and academic pathways. This aligns with findings by Conley (2013), who emphasized the importance of self-regulated learning and informed decision-making in college readiness. Additionally, students demonstrated financial preparedness by saving allowances and applying for scholarships, reflecting the significance of financial literacy in managing college expenses (Novitasari et al., 2021). Lifestyle adjustments, such as purchasing school supplies, managing transportation, and exploring the campus environment, further illustrate students' proactive approach to adapting to college life. These behaviors are consistent with research by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005 in Zayed, 2025), who highlighted the role of practical and social preparations in facilitating a smooth transition to higher education. Thus, the students' multifaceted efforts in personal readiness underscore the importance of holistic preparation in achieving academic and personal success in college.

c. Emotional Readiness

The data revealed that students exhibited a considerable level of emotional readiness by preparing mentally, emotionally, and spiritually for the challenges of college.

The students expressed their efforts to prepare emotionally for the transition to college. One shared, *"I prepare myself mentally and emotionally"* (P7), while another emphasized, *"I prepared myself for the struggles that were about to come"* (P17). To manage stress, a participant explained, *"I don't want to pressure myself that can surely affect my mental wellbeing"* (P23). Others reflected a more adaptive mindset, as one stated, *"I embraced adjustments especially in academic matters"* (P33).

P2, P15, and P17 had also emphasized that self-awareness and inner strength and P7, P11, P25, and P23 exerted efforts in adjusting mentally and emotionally to new environments and transitions. Others prepared by drawing on spiritual guidance and faith (P19) or by managing emotions through positive outlooks and relaxation before college (P23). One response also reflected an implied lack of preparation, which highlights the varied emotional states of students before entering college (P24). These accounts illustrate how students sought resilience in facing the emotional and academic challenges of higher education.

These findings support previous research suggesting that proactive learning strategies before they enter college that enhanced the students' preparedness for higher education (Credé and Phillips, 2017; Truong et al., 2022). Personally, participants emphasized independence, lifestyle adjustments, decision-making, and financial planning, aligning with Zhang et al. (2022), who emphasized the role of financial and lifestyle adjustments in college transition. Emotionally, students prepared by strengthening resilience, embracing adjustments, and drawing support from faith and family, echoing findings by Park and Kim (2019) that intrinsic goals and cultural values sustain student persistence.

2. Challenges that the First-Year Education Students Have Encountered

The challenges encountered by first-year students spanned across academic, personal, social, financial, and emotional domains, reflecting the multifaceted nature of their transition to higher education.

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a. Academic Challenges

First-year students encountered several academic challenges as they adjusted to the demands of higher education. Many reported **difficulties with time management and scheduling**, such as waking up for early morning classes, prioritizing multiple tasks, and managing sudden increases in workload (P5, P12, P18, P20). The **academic workload and pressure** also proved overwhelming, with students struggling to complete numerous projects, assignments, and performance tasks that were often due simultaneously (P6, P11, P16). Some also expressed **difficulty in understanding complex topics** and **keeping up with the fast-paced learning environment** (P22). Additionally, **instructor- and teaching-related issues** surfaced, with students feeling unsupported when professors did not provide adequate guidance, leaving them to rely heavily on self-study (P29). Together, these concerns highlight the academic stress that accompanied their transition to college.

Academic struggles were among the most prominent, particularly the adjustment to new learning environments and the heavy workload that accompanied college-level studies. Time management issues further compounded these difficulties, as students grappled with balancing numerous academic tasks alongside personal responsibilities. The transition from high school to college presents first-year students with interrelated academic, personal, and emotional challenges that can undermine both performance and well-being. Research shows that difficulties with time management and workload are major stressors for new college students, often linked to poorer academic outcomes when not adequately supported (Park and Swanson, 2021; Cabras and Mondo, 2023).

b. Personal Challenges

The transition to college life also brought about significant personal challenges. Students found it **difficult to adjust to a new environment**, often feeling out of place, experiencing culture shock, and struggling to navigate the unfamiliar academic system (P7, P15, P24, P2). **Financial challenges** were equally burdensome, with many reporting struggles to cover daily transportation expenses, allowance shortages, and the need to juggle part-time work alongside academic responsibilities (P9, P13, P19, P25). For those commuting, **transportation difficulties** created added stress, as long travel times and exhausting daily commutes affected their punctuality and drained their energy (P8, P14, P23). Furthermore, **balancing multiple roles and responsibilities** was a recurring challenge, with some students caught between schoolwork, family duties, and personal interests, including hobbies such as gaming (P4, P26, P28). These personal challenges underscore the practical adjustments required for a successful transition to college. These involve lifestyle changes, responsibilities, and practical adjustments. Financial concerns had also surfaced as a major challenge, with many students reporting that monetary pressures affected not only their ability to meet school requirements but also their emotional well-being. Transportation difficulties, especially long and exhausting commutes, added to the strain and reduced students' available time for rest and study. Social adjustment was another area of difficulty, as some students expressed challenges in forming new relationships and integrating into an unfamiliar academic community.

In addition, balancing multiple roles such as being a student while managing family expectations or personal commitments proved to be overwhelming for several individuals. A few students also mentioned difficulties related to instructional methods and interactions with professors, which further influenced their academic experience. Personal constraints such as financial stress, commuting burdens, and managing multiple responsibilities further intensify these issues, reducing the capacity to focus on learning (Zhang et al., 2022).

c. Emotional Challenges

In addition to academic and personal struggles, students grappled with emotional challenges that affected their well-being. Many encountered difficulties in social adjustment and friendships, as they struggled with **shyness, introversion, or missing their previous peer groups**, while also finding it difficult to form new support networks in college (P21, P27). As one student shared, *"I found it hard to socialize with my fellow students"* (P3), reflecting the emotional toll of adjusting to new social environments without an established support network. Similarly, another admitted, *"It's hard to socialize and adjust in [a] new environment"* (P10), highlighting the challenge of forming friendships and belonging in a new academic community.

The stress and emotional strain of juggling financial concerns, for instance, P9 revealed that *"Financial and academic pressure,"* while P13 echoed, *"It's definitely the financial struggles"*. In addition, academic requirements, and social adjustment further weighed heavily on students, often leading to **anxiety, fatigue, and self-doubt** (P9, P13, P16, P19, P7, P10, P21, P27). For some, the fatigue from commuting and the constant effort to balance multiple roles amplified these emotional difficulties (P8, P14, P26, P28). These responses reveal that emotional adaptation is as critical as academic preparedness in ensuring a smoother college transition, thus, emotional well-being, including feelings of isolation, anxiety, and adjustment to new social environments, plays a critical mediating role in how students cope with these pressures.

The findings highlight that emotional adaptation is just as important as academic preparedness in ensuring a smooth transition to college life. Students' emotional well-being, including how they manage feelings of isolation, stress, and anxiety, plays a critical mediating role in their ability to cope with the pressures of higher education. Research in the Philippine context shows

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that students with stronger emotional intelligence experience less transition shock and are better equipped to manage academic and social demands (Mergal, et al, 2019). Similarly, Tan, et al, (2024) emphasized that emotional well-being significantly affects academic performance, suggesting that students who effectively manage stress and anxiety perform better academically. Gil, et al, (2024) further point out that social adjustment challenges, such as feelings of isolation, hinder freshmen's adaptation to college, reinforcing the idea that both social and emotional readiness are key components of student success. These findings shows the need for universities to provide not only academic support but also structured interventions that foster resilience, emotional regulation, and a supportive social environment for freshmen.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the challenges faced by first-year students are interconnected rather than isolated. Academic struggles are often intensified by financial burdens and personal pressures, while emotional well-being is shaped by both social adjustment difficulties and external constraints such as commuting. This highlights the importance of implementing holistic support systems within higher education institutions— initiatives that address not only academic preparedness but also financial, social, and emotional needs to foster smoother transitions and overall student success.

3. Adaptation Practices and Strategies Employed by First-Year Education Students to Navigate the Challenges that they have Encountered

The findings revealed that first-year education students employed a wide range of adaptation practices and strategies to cope with the challenges of transitioning to college.

The most dominant theme was **time management and organization**, where students highlighted the importance of planning, prioritizing, and avoiding procrastination. Many shared that creating schedules, breaking down large tasks into smaller steps, and finishing requirements ahead of time helped them reduce stress and maintain balance. One participant explained, *"I created a to-do list and have better time management"* (P4), while another reflected, *"Improving my time management. I make it a habit to break big tasks into smaller, manageable pieces"* (P12). This finding aligns with previous research emphasizing that effective time management fosters academic success and reduces stress among first-year students (Truong et al., 2022).

Alongside time management, students also underscored that **giving importance to emotional and mental health** such as relaxation, self-care, and positive self-talk prevent burnout and sustain motivation. For instance, a participant shared, *"Giving myself time to rest and enjoy... is the best strategy"* (P3), while another emphasized, *"Do not overstress yourself"* (P10). Others mentioned drawing strength from friends and leisure activities, noting that engaging in small breaks helped them regain their mental energy. This reflects previous findings that self-care practices and stress management are critical coping mechanisms in maintaining emotional stability in higher education (Turner et al., 2021).

Another recurring theme was **seeking help and building support systems**. Students expressed that they relied not only on peers but also on family members for both academic and emotional support. This reflects the social dimension of adaptation, where collaboration and encouragement become essential coping mechanisms. For example, one participant stated, *"I surrounded myself in a good circle of friends"* (P9), while another remarked, *"Have some good friends that will help you overcome those challenges"* (P21). This finding is consistent with Tinto's (2017) and Caldwell, et al's (2021) study that highlights peer and social support is vital to student's resilience and academic success.

Equally important was **motivation through faith, family, and personal goals**. Many students drew resilience from their spirituality, their responsibility to their families, and their aspirations for the future. As one participant shared, *"Palagiang paghingi ng guidance kay Lord"* (P5), while another highlighted, *"Most importantly, I remember why I'm doing this – for my family"* (P18). These accounts reflect how cultural values, and personal convictions serve as strong driving forces in overcoming academic struggles. This echoes the findings of Park and Kim (2019), who reported that intrinsic goals, faith, and family support provide motivation and resilience for students navigating academic stress.

Students also described adopting study habits and academic strategies to enhance their learning and performance. These practices included **advance reading, consistent reviewing, and rehearsing for class presentations**. One participant remarked, *"I review 2 days before the exams to avoid academic cramming"* (P13), while another shared, *"I do dry runs at home before oral presentations"* (P28). Such practices reveal how structured academic routines support readiness and confidence in academic tasks. These results are supported by recent studies that emphasize the role of effective study habits and active learning strategies in improving student outcomes (Credé and Phillips, 2017).

Finally, some students emphasized the need to **maintain work-life balance**. They recognized that while academics are demanding, it is equally important to sustain friendships, hobbies, and leisure activities to avoid burn-out. As one participant expressed, *"Balance my study and personal life"* (P2), another added, *"Time-management... balance on academic and social life"* (P16). This reflects earlier findings that maintaining work-life balance is essential in preventing academic fatigue and fostering student well-being (Stallman et al., 2019).

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Overall, the findings illustrate that adaptation among first-year education students is a multifaceted process that integrates academic strategies, personal coping mechanisms, emotional regulation, social support, and cultural motivation. While time management emerged as the most dominant practice, the interconnectedness of emotional wellness, support systems, faith, family, and work-life balance highlighted the holistic nature of adaptation during the transition to higher education.

CONCLUSION

The findings revealed that while first-year education students entered college with a considerable degree of academic, personal, and emotional readiness, their transition was still marked by significant challenges. Academic preparedness alone was not enough to guarantee a smooth adjustment, as financial limitations, time management struggles, commuting pressures, and emotional stress also played critical roles.

Despite these barriers, students demonstrated resilience and adaptability through time management, wellness practices, social support, faith, and motivation from family and goals. These strategies underscore the importance of a holistic approach to readiness, one that goes beyond academics to include personal, social, and emotional dimensions; thus, the study concludes that the first-year transition is a multifaceted process that requires balanced preparation and institutional support. Students' success in higher education is best sustained when universities address not only academic preparedness but also financial realities, social integration, and emotional resilience.

RECOMMENDATION

The study underscores the importance of institutional interventions that address students' multifaceted needs. Universities should strengthen orientation and mentoring programs, expand financial assistance, and enhance counseling and peer-support services; thus, a College Academic Advising Program may be established to ease the transition, improve resilience, and foster academic success. Future research may also adopt a longitudinal design to trace adaptation practices beyond the first year and explore variations across gender, socioeconomic status, and program contexts.

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