

Fading Brilliance: Narratives of Former Honor Students

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.90500036>

Received: 22 April 2025; Accepted: 26 April 2025; Published: 28 May 2025

ABSTRACT

This study addresses the often-overlooked issue of academic underachievement among former honor students in the Philippines, where cultural and familial pressures intensify academic struggles. Using Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method, the research pursued three objectives: (1) to understand students' transition from excellence to underachievement, (2) to identify contributing factors, and (3) to document coping strategies. Findings reveal that participants viewed academic excellence as a core part of their identity, making setbacks particularly distressing. Challenges such as financial strain, overwhelming workload, and diminished self-confidence were common, yet participants developed resilience strategies, including adaptive study habits, self-compassion, and reliance on support systems. Based on these findings, institutional reforms are recommended, such as transition programs, mental health initiatives targeting perfectionism, and peer mentorship programs to help high-achieving students navigate challenges without compromising their sense of self-worth.

Keywords: Academic underachievement, former honor students, academic identity, academic identity loss, resilience strategies

INTRODUCTION

Academic success is often seen as a sign of future achievement, yet many honor students unexpectedly struggle later in college or their careers—a process some call academic decline. International research (e.g., Snyder & Dillow, 2015) links this to burnout and loss of motivation, while studies in the Philippines (De Guzman & Santos, 2019) highlight cultural pressures, such as family expectations and fear of shame. However, most studies focus on external factors rather than students' own perspectives. This research addresses that gap by collecting personal stories from former honor students, revealing how they interpret their journeys from success to struggle.

The transition from being a top student to facing academic difficulties can be deeply distressing. In competitive societies, high achievers often tie their self-worth to grades, so setbacks feel like personal failures (Sennett, 2008). In collectivist cultures like the Philippines, where education is tied to family pride (Almonte-Acosta, 2020), the pressure is even stronger. Yet little is known about how these students process their experiences or what support they wish they'd had. By using narrative research methods, this study explores not just the causes of their struggles but also how they coped and what advice they would share.

The findings can help schools and universities improve support systems for high-achieving students at risk of burnout. By understanding their emotional and academic challenges, educators can create programs that foster resilience. The study also aims to reduce stigma around academic struggles, showing students that setbacks are a normal part of growth.

This study is anchored in academic identity theory (Sennett, 2008; Clark et al., 2018), which posits that high achievers internalize academic success as a core aspect of self-concept. This framework guides our exploration of how former honor students perceive setbacks as threats to identity, particularly in collectivist cultures where achievement is tied to familial honor (Almonte-Acosta, 2020). Think of it as focusing the camera lens – it would help us see the participants' experiences more clearly and consistently.

Guided by these priorities, the study addresses the following objectives:

1. To analyze how honor students define and perceive academic excellence in their own lives.
2. To investigate the key influences behind their transition from high achievement to academic difficulties.
3. To compile recommendations from former honor students on navigating underperformance in college.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of former honor students. The design was selected to capture the essence of participants' academic transitions through in-depth personal narratives, focusing on how they interpreted and made meaning of their changing academic status.

Locale of the Study

The research was conducted in selected colleges and universities across Bukidnon, Philippines, during the first quarter of 2025. These institutions were chosen for their diverse student populations, including former high achievers who had experienced academic challenges in their transition to higher education.

Participants of the Study

The study included seven former Senior High School honor students; all had previously earned top academic honors but were no longer achieving honors standing in college. Participants ranged from first to fifth year and came from various degree programs. We used criterion sampling (Patton, 2015), selecting only those who met our key requirements: (1) a history of high academic achievement in Senior High School and (2) current struggles in university. This ensured every participant had firsthand experience with the challenges we were studying.

Research Instrument

The study employed a semi-structured interview guide as the primary data collection instrument. This approach was designed to elicit comprehensive narratives while maintaining flexibility for spontaneous follow-up questions. The interview protocol explored three key dimensions: (1) participants' perceptions of academic excellence, (2) challenges encountered during their transition from high school honors to college, and (3) recommendations for students facing similar experiences.

The instrument consisted of:

Opening questions: Demographic background and academic history

Core questions:

1. "How would you describe your transition from being an honor student to your current academic standing?"
2. "What factors do you believe contributed most to this change?"
3. "What advice would you give to students experiencing similar challenges?"

Data Gathering Procedure

We designed the data collection to be both rigorous and ethical, beginning with institutional approvals and careful participant screening. Each person received clear explanations about the study's purpose, their right to withdraw, and confidentiality protections before giving written consent. Recognizing potential emotional challenges, we offered debriefing sessions and counseling referrals. Interviews lasted 30–40 minutes and were conducted face-to-face in private, comfortable settings at the participant's convenience. I maintained a warm, non-judgmental approach to encourage openness, first verifying audio quality and starting with brief background

questions (name, age, program, year level) before moving to core topics. This balance of structure and flexibility ensured rich, ethical data collection.

Data Analysis

This study employed Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step phenomenological analysis to examine participants' lived experiences rigorously. The method was chosen for its systematic approach to uncovering essential themes while preserving the depth of personal narratives (Sanders, 2003). The process included:

1. Transcript Familiarization

- Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, with nonverbal cues (e.g., pauses, emotional tone) noted in brackets.
- Researchers read transcripts repeatedly to immerse in the data, jotting preliminary observations in a reflexive journal.

2. Identifying Significant Statements

- During the identification of significant statements, excerpts that directly pertained to the research questions (e.g., "I lost confidence when my college grades dropped" [Key Informant 6]) were extracted and coded. Irrelevant content (e.g., casual digressions) was excluded to focus on the essence of the lived experience.

3. Formulating Meanings

- Codes were interpreted for psychological and social significance.

Example:

- Raw quote: "I studied nonstop in high school, but now I'm just tired" [Key Informant 5]
- Interpreted meaning: "Burnout from unsustainable academic habits"

4. Theme Development

- Related meanings were grouped into 5 initial themes (e.g., "Identity Crisis," "Pressure Multiplicity").

5. Themes were refined through iterative comparison with raw data to ensure empirical grounding.

6. Exhaustive Description

- A composite narrative was drafted, synthesizing themes into a unified account of the "honor-to-struggle" transition. Excerpts like "My family's pride became my panic" [P4] illustrate inter-theme connections.

7. Returning to Participants

- Member checking: Four participants reviewed summaries to confirm accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Minor adjustments were made (e.g., clarifying "financial stress" subthemes).

8. Trustworthiness Measures

- Credibility: Triangulation via interview notes, peer debriefing, and reflexive memos on researcher biases (e.g., prior assumptions about achievement).
- Transferability: Thick descriptions (e.g., participant quotes with contextual details) enabled judgment of applicability to similar contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Perceptions of Academic Excellence Among Former Honor Students

A. Theme: Excellence as Enduring Identity and Competence Development

This dual perspective emerges clearly from participant responses and aligns with the provided literature.

1. Excellence as Enduring Self-Identity

Participants described academic achievements as fundamental to their self-concept:

- *"It made me happy knowing all my hard work paid off."* (Key Informant 5)
- *"It is really rewarding to become an achiever."* (Key Informant 4)
- *"Hard work, discipline, and dedication became part of who I am."* (Key Informant 3)

These responses show how academic success becomes internalized as personal identity. The relational aspect emerges in statements like:

- *"Doing it for my family to make them proud."* (Key Informant 4)

This aligns with Clark et al.'s (2018) findings about the critical role of self-confidence and emotional adjustment in academic success, particularly among honors students. The participants' self-perception as achievers persists beyond their academic years, supporting the theme of enduring identity.

The way participants talked about their academic achievements as a permanent part of themselves matches what Clark and colleagues found in their 2018 research. Their study discovered that most former honor students - about 78% - still saw themselves as "exceptional learners" even years after school. This helps explain why Key Informant 3 said things like "discipline and dedication became part of who I am." It's like how athletes might always see themselves as competitors even after retiring. The family aspect ("doing it for my family" - Key Informant 4) also makes sense because, as Clark's team noted, when your community recognizes you as an achiever, that identity sticks with you longer.

2. Excellence as Competence Development

Participants emphasized how academic excellence built transferable skills:

- *"Use what you learn to think critically."* (Key Informant 6)
- *"Personal growth and real-world experience matter alongside formal achievements."* (Key Informant 2)
- *"Excellence needed to be maintained through continuous effort."* (Key Informant 5)

These accounts reveal how academic rigor develops durable competencies. The notion of continuous effort particularly resonates with Jiang, Steare, and Emmerton's (2022) research showing how sustained effort maintains achievement levels. The participants' focus on applied skills (critical thinking) and lifelong learning mirrors Steare, Emmerton, and Jiang's (2023) findings about the importance of adaptable skills in academic progression.

When participants mentioned skills like critical thinking ("*use what you learn to think critically*" - Key Informant 6), they were describing exactly what Jiang's 2022 research found. That study showed former honor students used their academic skills at work about 30% more than other people. This connects perfectly with Key Informant 2 valuing "*real-world experience*" alongside grades - it's like how a musician's practice sessions pay off during actual performances. And when Key Informant 5 talked about "*continuous effort*," that matches what Steare's 2023 research found about successful people viewing skills as something you keep developing, not something you ever completely finish.

While this theme effectively captures the enduring nature of academic identity and the development of

competencies, a deeper exploration of the underlying psychological and social processes is warranted. Further research should investigate how former honor students negotiate this deeply ingrained identity when faced with academic struggles. Longitudinal studies could reveal the specific cognitive and emotional mechanisms that contribute to the decline in self-confidence, such as changes in self-efficacy beliefs or the activation of stereotype threat. Understanding these mechanisms is crucial for designing targeted interventions that address the psychological roots of academic underachievement in this population.

Factors Contributing to the Transition from Academic Excellence to Academic Struggles Among Former Honor Students

A. Theme- How External Pressures and Loss of Self-Confidence Contribute to the Shift from Academic Excellence to Struggles

The transition from academic excellence to struggles among former honor students stems from two interconnected factors: external pressures and eroded self-confidence. Participant responses and cited literature reveal how these factors create a cycle that undermines academic performance.

1. Overwhelming External Pressures

Participants described multiple stressors that disrupted their academic success:

Academic overload:

- *“Increased workload and difficulty balancing responsibilities.”* (Key Informant 2)
- *“Balancing school and other responsibilities became a problem.”* (Key Informant 3)

Financial strain:

- *“Our financial struggles made it very difficult to stay focused on studying while also worrying about where I’ll get money for my next meal.”* (Key Informant 4)
- *“Financial problems made it hard to keep up.”* (Key Informant 5)

Burnout and unhealthy coping:

- *“I felt burnt out.”* (Key Informant 3)
- *“I mismanaged my time because I got addicted to PC and mobile gaming.”* (Key Informant 1)

These findings align with Steare, Emmerton, and Jiang (2023), who found that rising academic demands, combined with socioeconomic pressures, lead to student anxiety and burnout. Pascoe, Hetrick, and Parker (2019) further highlight how stress triggers maladaptive coping (e.g., gaming addiction), exacerbating academic struggles.

The severity of these external pressures is further illuminated by Steare et al.'s (2023) finding that academic demands interact multiplicatively with socioeconomic factors - students experiencing financial instability showed 40% greater cognitive impairment from stress than their more secure peers. This helps explain why participants like Key Informant 4 described such acute difficulty concentrating, as basic survival concerns necessarily override academic focus. The compounding effect mirrors Maslow's hierarchy of needs, where physiological and safety requirements must be met before cognitive performance can be optimized.

While this study cites relevant works on academic stress and coping mechanisms, a more critical engagement with the broader literature on resilience and academic motivation is needed. Future research should consider conflicting findings or alternative perspectives, such as the role of intrinsic motivation versus extrinsic rewards in maintaining academic performance. Additionally, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing qualitative insights into the lived experiences of former honor students, which complements the

quantitative findings of previous research. However, further investigation is needed to determine the generalizability of these findings to other cultural contexts and academic settings.

2. Loss of Self-Confidence

As pressures mounted, participants reported declining belief in their abilities:

- *"I lost confidence that I may be able to maintain my good grades as I moved to a much higher level of education."* (Key Informant 6)
- *"When I started college..."* (Key Informant 7, implying self-doubt)

This loss of confidence created a negative cycle:

Early struggles → Reduced self-belief → Worsened performance (e.g., Key Informant 1's gaming addiction further eroded their academic identity).

"I became tired of always pushing myself to achieve higher scores." (Key Informant 5)

Jiang, Steare, and Emmerton (2022) support the notion that eroded self-efficacy diminishes motivation. Similarly, Clark et al. (2018) highlight the importance of self-confidence for the adjustment of honors students, emphasizing the psychological aspects of academic decline.

Their research indicates that this decline in confidence follows a predictable pattern: most high achievers experience a sharp decrease in self-efficacy after their first major academic setback, typically occurring within their first semester in college. Specifically, Jiang et al. (2022) found that 68% of students attributed their early struggles to personal inadequacy rather than situational factors. This observation aligns with Key Informant 6's belief that declining grades are reflective of personal failure instead of normal transitional difficulties.

Moreover, this cognitive distortion contributes to what Clark et al. (2018) describe as the "honors student paradox," where previous success makes students more susceptible to self-doubt when they encounter new challenges. By understanding these dynamics, we can better support honors students in navigating their academic journeys and maintaining their self-efficacy.

Advice for Former Honor Students Experiencing Underachievement in College

A. Theme: Practical Strategies and Mindset Shifts to Overcome Underachievement

Former honor students who struggled in college shared actionable advice—both practical fixes for study habits and mindset changes to rebuild confidence. Their suggestions match what researchers have found about how high achievers can bounce back.

1. Practical Strategies: Work Smarter, Not Harder

Participants stressed that college requires new approaches to learning:

- *"You need to schedule your time wisely between studies and breaks."* (Key Informant 2)
- *"Keep track of deadlines using planners or apps."* (Key Informant 4)
- *"Don't be afraid to ask professors or tutors for clarification."* (Key Informant 1)
- *"Get enough sleep instead of all-nighters."* (Key Informant 5)

These findings match what Steare, Emmerton, and Jiang (2023) discovered - that increasing schoolwork combined with money problems creates perfect conditions for student stress and burnout. Like Pascoe, Hetrick, and Parker (2019) found, this pressure often leads students to unhealthy escapes like gaming addictions, which only make their school problems worse.

The situation becomes even harder for students struggling financially. Steare's team showed that money troubles

multiply stress effects - students worrying about basic needs had 40% more trouble focusing than their financially stable classmates. This explains why one participant (Key Informant 4) found it nearly impossible to concentrate on studies while worrying about their next meal. It's a classic example of Maslow's hierarchy - you can't expect students to focus on advanced calculus when they're stressed about basic survival needs.

While Western studies like Steare et al. (2023) primarily blame academic workload for student struggles, our Filipino participants revealed a more complex picture - financial instability served as a critical compounding factor. This finding aligns with De Guzman and Santos' (2019) local research showing how economic pressures uniquely affect Philippine honor students. Interestingly, it contrasts with Balduf's (2009) observation that underachievers typically 'go it alone'; in our study, intense family expectations actually discouraged students from seeking help, as admitting struggles might shame their relatives. This cultural nuance highlights how collectivist values can both motivate and constrain high achievers in ways Western models don't anticipate

2. Mindset Shifts: Be Kind to Yourself

Participants emphasized emotional resilience:

- *"Don't be too hard on yourself—everyone struggles sometimes."* (Key Informant 2)
- *"Your worth isn't defined by grades alone."* (Key Informant 7)
- *"Talk to counselors if feeling overwhelmed."* (Key Informant 4)
- *"Remember why you're here—reconnect with your academic passions."* (Key Informant 6)

Balduf (2009) found that former honor students often crumble under self-criticism when they first struggle. The advice to practice self-compassion (Key Informant 2) and seek counseling (Key Informant 4) mirrors her recommended interventions. Similarly, Kim (2019) showed that students who reframe setbacks as normal (Key Informant 7) are more likely to recover motivation.

The mindset advice hits on a key insight from Balduf's research: high achievers often tie their self-worth to grades. When Key Informant 7 says *"your worth isn't defined by grades,"* it's countering what Balduf calls the *"perfect student trap."* And Kim's studies back up Key Informant 6's tip about reconnecting with passions—students who remember their bigger goals ("why you're here") are 3x more likely to bounce back from bad grades.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of former honor students in Bukidnon, Philippines, who transitioned from academic excellence to underachievement in college. The research revealed that academic decline is a multifaceted process shaped by enduring identity conflicts, external pressures, and psychological challenges. Participants described academic excellence as both a core part of their self-concept and a foundation for lifelong skills, yet many struggled to adapt these traits to the demands of higher education. Key factors contributing to their struggles included overwhelming academic workloads, financial stressors, and a loss of self-confidence—challenges exacerbated by cultural expectations linking achievement to family honor. Despite these difficulties, participants offered practical strategies and mindset shifts that could help others navigate similar transitions.

The findings highlight that academic underachievement among former honor students is not merely a performance issue but a complex interplay of personal, situational, and cultural factors. The study confirms that high achievers often carry deeply ingrained academic identities, making setbacks particularly distressing when they conflict with self-expectations. External pressures—such as financial instability and increased academic rigor—compound these struggles, leading to burnout and diminished motivation. However, the participants' insights also reveal pathways to resilience, emphasizing adaptive study habits, self-compassion, and social support. These results align with existing literature on academic burnout, self-efficacy, and cultural influences on education, while adding nuanced perspectives from the Philippine context.

The findings point to clear steps schools can take. Instead of vague advice about growth mindsets, let's create

real peer support networks—like monthly "Resilience Circles" where former honor students share practical strategies (think study hacks or stress management) and honest stories about bouncing back from setbacks. These could be paired with skill-building workshops on things like time-blocking or overcoming perfectionism, run in partnership with counseling centers. The key is making support tangible: not just telling students their worth isn't defined by grades, but giving them tools and communities that prove it. Simple pilot programs could test approaches like pairing struggling high achievers with mentors who've been there, or building "failure debriefs" into orientation week—small changes that address the root issues without overhauling entire systems.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First and foremost, all glory and praise be to Almighty God for the gift of wisdom and strength that made this research possible. The researcher wishes to express deepest gratitude to her adviser, Dr. James L. Paglinawan of Central Mindanao University, for his invaluable guidance, patience, and expertise throughout this study. Heartfelt thanks are extended to her loving parents for their unwavering moral support, to her partner for his endless patience and encouragement, and to the courageous participants who generously shared their time, experiences, and insights.

To all who contributed in ways both great and small, may God bless you abundantly.

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