

Understanding Academic Vulnerability and Psychological Adjustment: Perspectives from Instructors and Students

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Abstract

Introduction: The study examines how college instructors and students on the Dean's list perceive non-cognitive academic risks and psychological adjustment challenges in higher education. Gaining insight into the perspectives of both groups is crucial for developing interventions that promote student success, emotional well-being, and educational stability..

Objectives: The primary objectives of the study are to compare the perceived non-cognitive academic risks and psychological adjustment challenges between instructors and students and to examine the correlation between these two constructs.

Methods: The study involved 536 college instructors with at least five years of teaching experience and 290 fourth-year student Dean's listers from selected private institutions in Pagadian City Division. Data were collected through validated Likert-scale surveys. Statistical analyses, including t-tests for independent samples and Pearson correlation, were used to assess differences in perceptions and determine relationships between variables.

Results: Both instructors and students reported high levels of non-cognitive academic risk and psychological adjustment challenges. The t-test showed no significant difference in perceptions of academic risk, indicating a shared understanding between groups. However, a significant difference was observed in perceptions of psychological adjustment, with instructors reporting slightly higher levels. The correlation analysis revealed a weak but statistically significant positive relationship between non-cognitive academic risk and psychological adjustment, suggesting that as one increases, the other tends to rise as well.

Conclusions: The findings highlight the interrelated nature of academic and emotional challenges in college students. There is a need for institutions to develop integrated support systems that address both academic preparedness and mental health. Faculty training, accessible counseling services, and holistic student support programs are recommended to mitigate these challenges and promote overall student well-being and academic performance.

Keywords: non-cognitive academic risk, psychological adjustment, college instructors, students, higher education, descriptive survey

1. Introduction

Academic performance remains a key measure for assessing student success, institutional quality, and the effectiveness of educational policies. While traditional views have often emphasized cognitive predictors like intelligence quotient (IQ), academic aptitude, and prior achievement, contemporary research highlights the significant yet indirect role of non-cognitive and emotional factors in shaping student outcomes (Credé & Kuncel, 2008; Richardson, Abraham, & Bond, 2012). Among these factors are financial challenges, insufficient support systems, poor study habits, and a lack of academic preparation—factors which, in this study, are grouped under the construct of Perceived

Non-Cognitive Academic Risk. Simultaneously, many college students confront psychological difficulties such as depression, anxiety, homesickness, and sleep disturbances. These are captured under a second construct termed Psychological Adjustment Challenges in College.

These two constructs—though distinct—are often experienced concurrently by students, particularly during transitions such as entering college or adapting to new academic demands. The first construct, Perceived Non-Cognitive Academic Risk, finds theoretical grounding in Tinto's Student Integration Model (1975), which highlights the importance of academic and social integration in student retention,

and Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (1984), which emphasizes student behaviors and engagement as critical to academic success. The role of poor study habits and insufficient preparation also aligns with Zimmerman's Self-Regulated Learning Theory (2002), which links academic performance with goal-setting, self-monitoring, and time management.

The second construct, Psychological Adjustment Challenges, is rooted in models of emotional adaptation and coping. Notably, Baker and Siryk's Student Adaptation to College Model (1984) outlines personal-emotional adjustment, attachment, and psychological resilience as vital to academic performance and well-being. Similarly, Lazarus and Folkman's Stress and Coping Theory (1984) provides a useful lens for interpreting how students perceive and respond to emotional stressors such as homesickness and anxiety. The Diathesis-Stress Model further suggests that predispositions for mental health issues can be activated or exacerbated by situational stressors—such as the academic and social pressures of college life (Monroe & Simons, 1991).

Although these models and constructs have been well-documented in separate bodies of literature, limited research has examined their interrelationship or the alignment of student and instructor perceptions regarding these risk factors. Moreover, while studies on mental health in higher education have gained traction, few explicitly explore how non-cognitive academic risks and psychological adjustment difficulties intersect to impact academic performance. There is also a noticeable gap in literature that compares the perspectives of both students and their instructors, who may observe or experience these challenges differently.

This study seeks to address these research gaps by surveying the perceptions of both college students and their instructors regarding non-cognitive academic risks and psychological adjustment challenges. Responses were analyzed to determine the degree of alignment or divergence between the two groups. Furthermore, a correlational analysis was conducted to explore the relationship between the two constructs. By integrating dual perspectives and testing associations between emotional and behavioral risk factors, this study aims to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges that college students face, and how these may influence or hinder academic success. The findings are intended to inform institutional interventions,

student support systems, and academic practices that respond holistically to the needs of today's learners.

2. Objectives

This study aims to explore the non-cognitive and psychological challenges that affect college students' academic experiences by analyzing the perceptions of both students and their instructors. The overarching goal is to provide a deeper understanding of how non-cognitive academic risk factors (e.g., finances, lack of support, poor study habits, and poor preparation) and psychological adjustment challenges (e.g., depression, anxiety, homesickness, and difficulty sleeping) influence student success in higher education settings.

Specifically, this study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine and compare the perceptions of college students and instructors regarding the presence and impact of non-cognitive academic risk factors.
2. To examine and compare the perceptions of college students and instructors regarding the presence and impact of psychological adjustment challenges encountered in college.
3. To determine the correlation between the two constructs—Perceived Non-Cognitive Academic Risk and Psychological Adjustment Challenges in College—as reported by the student respondents.

By addressing these objectives, the study aims to uncover patterns of agreement or divergence between student and instructor perspectives, and to investigate the extent to which non-cognitive and psychological challenges are interrelated. The findings are intended to inform institutional support strategies, classroom practices, and counseling services that collectively contribute to student well-being and academic success.

3. Methods

This study employed a descriptive-survey research design to examine the relationship between academic conflicts that indirectly affect student performance and common psychological challenges experienced in college. This design was deemed appropriate for describing the perceptions of instructors and students, as well as for investigating the relationship between two sets of variables representing non-cognitive and psychological risk factors.

The respondents of the study consisted of 536 college instructors and 290 fourth-year students who were top 10 Dean’s listers in their respective programs. The instructors were selected from a population of 689, with the inclusion criteria requiring that they had rendered at least five years of teaching service. This criterion was set to ensure that respondents had sufficient experience to provide informed insights into the academic conflicts affecting students. Meanwhile, student respondents were selected based on academic excellence, representing those most likely to have overcome or encountered the identified challenges. Both groups were drawn from five private higher education institutions within a division in Pagadian City, selected for their relevance and accessibility to the researcher.

Two separate instruments were used for data collection—one for instructors and another for students. Each questionnaire included items that addressed two main constructs: perceived non-cognitive academic risk, which included the variables of finances, lack of support, poor study habits, and poor preparation; and psychological adjustment challenges in college, which included depression, anxiety, homesickness, and difficulty sleeping. Responses were rated using a 6-point Likert scale designed to measure either the degree of agreement or the frequency of experience, depending on the item. Both instruments were tested for validity and reliability, with Cronbach’s alpha coefficients exceeding 0.80, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

The study was conducted during the summer of 2019 and the first semester of the 2019–2020 academic year. Prior to data collection, the necessary permissions were obtained from institutional administrators. The researcher personally administered the survey instruments and ensured that ethical standards were followed, including voluntary participation, informed consent, and the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity for all participants.

Data analysis involved the use of descriptive statistics to summarize responses, independent samples t-tests to compare the perceptions of instructors and students across the two constructs, and Pearson correlation to examine the relationship between perceived non-cognitive academic risk and psychological adjustment challenges in college. These statistical methods allowed for a comprehensive assessment of both differences in

perception and the strength of association between the variables.

4. Results and Discussions

This section presents the findings of the study based on the data gathered from instructors and student respondents. The results are organized to address the objectives of the research, beginning with the descriptive levels of perceived non-cognitive academic risks and psychological adjustment challenges. This is followed by the comparison of perceptions between instructors and students, and finally, the correlation between the two main constructs. The discussions are integrated with the interpretation of findings to highlight their implications on educational practices and student support in the college setting.

Table 1

Descriptive levels of instructors and students’ perceived non-cognitive academic risk and psychological adjustment in college

Variables	Instructors (n=536)		Students (n=290)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Perceived Non-cognitive Academic Risk				
1 Finances	5.01	1.00	5.18	1.08
2 Lack of Support	5.33	0.85	5.35	0.91
3 Poor Study Habits	5.30	0.85	5.48	0.72
4 Poor Preparation	5.44	0.53	5.53	0.71
Perceived Psychological Adjustment in College				
1 Depression	5.52	0.51	5.62	0.51
2 Anxiety	5.57	0.53	5.51	5.55
3 Homesickness	5.67	0.49	5.54	0.63
4 Difficulty Sleeping	5.56	0.56	5.57	0.58

Note: M = mean, SD = Standard deviation: 1.00 – 1.83 = Never Manifested, 1.84 – 2.67 = Rarely Manifested, 2.68 – 3.50 = Sometimes Manifested, 3.51 – 4.33 = Often Manifested, 4.34 – 5.16 = Almost Always Manifested, 5.17 – 6.00 = Always Manifested

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics on the perceived levels of non-cognitive academic risk and psychological adjustment challenges in college as reported by instructors and students. Overall, both groups indicated that these challenges are consistently present, with mean scores across all variables falling within the "Always Manifested" range (5.17 – 6.00).

For non-cognitive academic risk, both instructors and students rated all four indicators—finances, lack of support, poor study habits, and poor preparation—as frequently experienced by students. Among instructors, the highest mean was observed in poor preparation (M = 5.44, SD = 0.53), suggesting that they perceive this as the most persistent non-cognitive barrier to student success. This was closely followed by lack of support (M = 5.33) and poor study habits (M = 5.30). Finances received the lowest instructor mean (M = 5.01), though still within the “almost always manifested” level.

On the other hand, student respondents rated poor preparation (M = 5.53, SD = 0.71) and poor study habits (M = 5.48, SD = 0.72) as the most prominent risks. Finances also received a high mean score (M = 5.18), slightly above the instructor mean and categorized as “always manifested.” These findings suggest that students themselves are highly aware of their personal learning challenges, and place slightly more emphasis on financial constraints than instructors do.

In terms of psychological adjustment in college, both groups identified high levels of manifestation across all four indicators. Instructors reported the highest mean for homesickness (M = 5.67, SD = 0.49), followed by difficulty sleeping (M = 5.56), anxiety (M = 5.57), and depression (M = 5.52). Students, meanwhile, rated depression the highest (M = 5.62, SD = 0.51), followed by difficulty sleeping (M = 5.57) and homesickness (M = 5.54). Interestingly, both groups identified anxiety with similarly high scores, though students rated it slightly lower than instructors.

These results suggest a convergence in perception between instructors and students regarding the frequency and seriousness of both non-cognitive academic risks and psychological adjustment issues. The high scores across all variables indicate that these challenges are consistently and strongly perceived as impacting students, supporting the need for institutional support systems that address both academic and mental health concerns holistically.

Table 2 presents the results of the independent samples t-test comparing instructors’ and students’ perceptions of non-cognitive academic risk. The findings show that instructors (M = 5.27, SD = 0.18) and students (M = 5.39, SD = 0.16) both reported high levels of non-cognitive challenges, with mean scores falling within the “Always Manifested” range. However, the

computed t-value of 0.995 and a p-value of 0.32 indicate that the difference in perceptions is not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). This suggests that both groups share a relatively consistent perception regarding the extent to which non-cognitive factors—such as finances, lack of support, poor study habits, and poor preparation—impact student performance.

Table 2

Test of significant difference of Perceived Non-cognitive Academic Risk between instructors and students

Groups	n	M	SD	t	df	p-value
Instructors	536	5.27	0.18	0.995	824	0.32
Students	290	5.39	0.16			

The slight difference in mean values, with students reporting slightly higher levels, may reflect their direct and personal experience with these challenges. In contrast, instructors may recognize these issues based on observation and interaction with students, but possibly underestimate their depth or frequency.

This result supports previous research emphasizing the importance of considering both student and educator perspectives when analyzing non-cognitive academic barriers. According to Robbins et al. (2004), non-cognitive factors like motivation, support systems, and study behaviors are critical predictors of college success and are often better understood when both personal and institutional lenses are applied. Similarly, Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2006) highlight that shared recognition of these challenges between students and faculty enhances institutional efforts to support academic engagement and retention.

Overall, the absence of a significant difference in perception reinforces the importance of collaborative interventions that involve both students and instructors in addressing non-cognitive academic risks. It also suggests a strong alignment in how both parties view the frequency and seriousness of these barriers.

Table 3 presents the results of the independent samples t-test comparing instructors’ and students’ perceptions of psychological adjustment challenges in college, which include depression, anxiety, homesickness, and difficulty sleeping. The mean scores of both groups fall within the “Always Manifested” range, with instructors reporting a slightly higher mean (M = 5.58, SD = 0.06) compared to students (M = 5.56,

SD = 0.04). Despite the close proximity of the mean values, the analysis yielded a t-value of 5.096 and a p-value less than 0.05, indicating that the difference in perceptions between instructors and students is statistically significant.

Table 3

Test of significant difference of Perceived Psychological Adjustment in College between instructors and students

Groups	n	M	SD	t	df	p-value
Instructors	536	5.58	0.06	5.096	824	< 0.05
Students	290	5.56	0.04			

This finding suggests that while both groups acknowledge the consistent presence of psychological challenges, instructors tend to perceive these issues as more pronounced or more frequent than students themselves report. This may reflect an increased awareness among faculty of mental health concerns based on behavioral observations, academic performance declines, or counseling referrals. Conversely, students may underreport their emotional struggles due to stigma, lack of awareness, or normalization of stress-related symptoms during college life.

The significant difference in perception aligns with findings by Eisenberg, Hunt, and Speer (2013), who noted that mental health issues in college are often more visible to faculty and staff due to their cumulative exposure to multiple student cases. Moreover, research by Conley, Durlak, and Kirsch (2015) suggests that psychological well-being is a critical yet often under-discussed aspect of student adjustment, and that discrepancies in awareness between students and educators can hinder the timely implementation of support measures.

This result highlights the need for enhanced mental health education, open communication, and destigmatizing interventions within college environments. It also underscores the value of faculty training in recognizing signs of emotional distress and establishing responsive systems of support. The gap in perception, although statistically small, reinforces the importance of bridging understanding between stakeholders to ensure a shared commitment to student mental wellness.

Table 4 shows the results of the correlation analysis between perceived non-cognitive academic risk and psychological adjustment challenges among students. The results indicate a positive but weak correlation ($r = 0.12$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that while the relationship between these two constructs exists, it is relatively minimal in strength. However, the statistically significant p-value indicates that the association is unlikely to have occurred by chance.

Table 4

Correlation between non-cognitive academic risk and psychological adjustment in college

Variables	M	SD	r	p-value
Perceived Non-cognitive Academic Risk	5.33	0.17	0.12	< 0.05
Perceived Psychological Adjustment in College	5.57	0.06		

This means that students who perceive higher levels of non-cognitive academic risks—such as financial difficulties, lack of support, poor study habits, and poor preparation—are also slightly more likely to experience psychological adjustment challenges, including depression, anxiety, homesickness, and difficulty sleeping. While the correlation is weak, it nonetheless affirms that academic and emotional risks do not occur in isolation, but can coexist and potentially influence one another.

These findings align with prior research suggesting that environmental and behavioral stressors can contribute to or exacerbate mental health concerns among college students. For instance, Conley, Travers, and Bryant (2013) noted that poor academic preparedness and lack of support systems are predictive of increased stress and emotional difficulty during the college transition. Similarly, Hartley (2011) highlighted how academic struggles and self-regulation issues often contribute to psychological distress, particularly among students who lack coping mechanisms.

Although the correlation is not strong, the significance of the relationship emphasizes the need for integrated student support systems that address both academic and emotional dimensions of college life. Interventions such as academic advising, study skills training, counseling, and mental health awareness programs can help mitigate the compounded effects of these

challenges. The findings also suggest that educators and institutional leaders should consider both types of risks in designing retention strategies and student development programs.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study examined the perceptions of instructors and student Dean's lists concerning non-cognitive academic risks and psychological adjustment challenges in college, as well as the relationship between these two constructs. The findings indicated that both groups consistently perceive high levels of academic and psychological challenges. Specifically, instructors and students concurred that factors such as financial issues, lack of support, poor study habits, and inadequate preparation are consistently evident in students' academic experiences. Similarly, both groups recognized the persistent presence of psychological issues such as depression, anxiety, homesickness, and sleep difficulties. These results support the growing body of research suggesting that students encounter a complex mix of academic and emotional stressors that necessitate holistic intervention (Conley, Durlak, & Kirsch, 2015; Robbins et al., 2004).

Although no significant difference was found between instructors' and students' perceptions of non-cognitive academic risk, a notable difference emerged in their views on psychological adjustment, with instructors rating these challenges slightly higher. This suggests that while academic risks are equally acknowledged, instructors may possess a heightened awareness of students' emotional difficulties—likely due to their accumulated experience in observing behavior, performance, and well-being over time (Eisenberg, Hunt, & Speer, 2013). Additionally, the correlation analysis revealed a weak but statistically significant positive relationship between non-cognitive academic risk and psychological adjustment. This indicates that students facing academic challenges are also somewhat more likely to encounter emotional or mental health concerns—a relationship supported by earlier findings linking study habits and preparedness to student anxiety and depression (Conley, Travers, & Bryant, 2013; Hartley, 2011).

These insights underscore the necessity for comprehensive and integrative support systems within higher education. Addressing academic challenges in isolation may prove insufficient; institutions must also cater to students' emotional and psychological needs to

foster long-term success and well-being (Kuh et al., 2006). Based on the findings, several recommendations are put forward. First, colleges and universities should establish academic support programs that encompass mentoring, time management training, and study skills workshops. Second, institutions must ensure that mental health services are accessible, student-centered, and well-publicized, with efforts to reduce the stigma associated with seeking help (Conley et al., 2015). Third, faculty members should receive professional development to help them recognize early signs of distress and respond with empathy and appropriate referrals. Encouraging faculty-student engagement beyond classroom instruction can also contribute to a more supportive academic environment.

Moreover, institutional feedback systems may be established to assess the effectiveness of current support services. These evaluations must incorporate both student and instructor perspectives to ensure they are responsive and adaptable. Ultimately, cultivating a campus culture that emphasizes care and collaboration, prioritizing both academic and emotional well-being, will lead to more resilient and successful students, as well as a healthier educational environment (Eisenberg et al., 2013; Hartley, 2011). By taking these steps, higher education institutions can effectively address the intertwined academic and emotional needs of their students. This study underscores the importance of a shared understanding between faculty and students and highlights the necessity of ongoing, holistic interventions that support not only learning but also mental wellness and personal development.

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