



School related problems and coping strategies among freshmen students in a Philippine higher education institution

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Abstract

College freshmen face a wide range of challenges that touch nearly every part of their academic and personal lives. This descriptive study examined the school-related problems most commonly experienced by 355 first-year students in a higher education institution during the second semester of academic year 2024-2025, as well as the coping strategies they employed in response. Data were gathered using a validated and reliable researcher-made questionnaire (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.83$) and analyzed using descriptive statistics, independent samples t-tests, and Pearson's product-moment correlation. Results showed that students experienced school-related problems only 'sometimes' overall ($M = 2.54$), with difficulty in managing time well, difficulty in setting goals, and difficulty in handling emotions emerging as the top three concerns, all reflecting deficits in self-regulation. No significant differences in school-related problems were found across sex, family structure, or place of residence, suggesting that first-year stress is a broadly shared experience. Coping strategy use was reported 'often' ($M = 2.78$), with listening to music, laughing with friends, and watching television ranking as the most frequently used approaches. A significant difference in coping strategies was found between male and female students ($t = 2.29, p = .023$), while no significant differences emerged by family structure or place of residence. A significant positive correlation was found between school-related problems and coping strategy use ($r = .441, p = .001$), indicating that students who encounter more difficulties also tend to mobilize more coping efforts. These findings highlight the importance of integrating self-regulatory skills training and culturally responsive emotional support into first-year programs, ensuring that all students have the tools they need to meet the demands of college life.

Keywords: College freshmen, school-related problems, coping strategies, self-regulation, academic stress

Introduction

Starting college is one of the biggest transitions a young person will face. For many students, it is the first time they are truly on their own, managing their time, their money, their relationships, and their studies all at once. It is exciting, no doubt, but it can also be quite overwhelming. The first year of college is particularly stressful, and the problems students encounter during this period can have lasting effects on their academic performance and mental health.

Students from all kinds of backgrounds and life situations tend to share certain vulnerabilities when they enter higher education. They may struggle with the workload, feel disconnected from their classmates or instructors, or find themselves dealing with personal and family issues that make focusing on school incredibly difficult. According to Wathelet *et al.* (2020) [31], a substantial proportion of university students report clinically significant levels of psychological distress, with many experiencing anxiety or depression that goes unaddressed. These issues rarely exist in isolation as stress in one area of a student's life tends to spill over into others.

School-related problems can generally be grouped into two broad categories: academic problems and behavioral or psychological problems. Academic difficulties often include poor study habits, trouble keeping up with coursework, and performance anxiety. Psychological and behavioral concerns, on the other hand, may manifest as depression, irritability, social withdrawal, or difficulty concentrating. Lipson *et al.* (2018) [50], found that academic impairment

due to mental health concerns is alarmingly common, affecting a significant number of students who never seek professional help. This gap between need and help-seeking is a serious concern for institutions that want to support their students effectively.

What makes freshmen especially vulnerable is the combination of novelty and expectation. They are entering a new environment without the social networks they relied on before, often under pressure to perform well from the very start. Baker & Siryk (1984) as cited by Ayele (2018) [3, 4] described college adjustment as a multi-dimensional process involving academic, social, personal, and institutional dimensions, and problems in any of these areas can derail a student's progress. Some students manage these challenges gracefully, while others find themselves overwhelmed before the first semester even ends.

In response to these pressures, students naturally develop or draw on various coping strategies. Coping, as defined by Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) [21] classic transactional model, refers to the cognitive and behavioral efforts an individual makes to manage demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding their resources (Mkumbo *et al.*, 2023) [27]. Whether a student reaches out to friends, immerses themselves in exercise, or simply tries to ignore the problem, these responses reflect deeply personal and culturally shaped patterns of behavior. Understanding how students cope, and whether their chosen strategies are truly helpful, is just as important as identifying the problems themselves.

This paper is grounded in observations that freshmen students were showing signs of academic disengagement such as missing deadlines, performing poorly on assessments, skipping classes, or simply appearing detached and uninterested. These behaviors prompted a deeper inquiry into the root causes and the ways students were trying to handle the pressures around them. The goal was not just to document a problem, but to understand it well enough to inform better support systems for students who need them most.

Statement of the Problem

The study was conducted to identify the school-related problems and the coping strategies of the freshmen students during the second semester of academic year 2024-2025^[38]. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the school-related problems frequently experienced by the students when taken as a whole group and when classified according to sex, family structure, and place of residence?
2. Is there a significant difference in the school-related problems frequently experienced by students when classified according to sex, family structure, and place of residence?
3. What coping strategies do these students use to overcome the school-related problems that confront them when taken as a group and when classified according to sex, family structure, and place of residence?
4. Is there a significant difference in the coping strategies frequently used by the students to overcome the school-related problems that confront them when classified according to sex, family structure, and place of residence?
5. Is there a significant correlation between the school-related problems and the coping strategies of the students?

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two well-established theoretical frameworks: General Systems Theory and Attribution Theory. Together, these perspectives offer a layered understanding of why students experience the problems they do, and how they decide to respond.

General systems theory, as articulated by Von Bertalanffy (1972)^[45], views organizations, and by extension, individuals, as dynamic entities that process inputs and generate outputs through a series of internal mechanisms. Applied to the student experience, this framework positions school-related problems as inputs, the raw challenges and stressors that students bring with them or encounter in the academic environment. The coping strategies students use represent the system's output, the actions and adaptations produced in response to those inputs. This lens is particularly useful because it reminds us that student behavior does not occur in a vacuum. It is shaped by a web of interconnected forces, including family background, peer relationships, institutional culture, and the student's own psychological resources (Laszlo and Krippner, 1998)^[20].

Research in educational settings has used systems thinking to highlight how organizational factors, such as the quality of academic support or the responsiveness of faculty, can either buffer or amplify student stress (Versteeg and Kappe, 2021; Von Bertalanffy, 1968)^[43, 44].

Attribution theory, originally developed by Heider (1958) and later expanded by Weiner (2018)^[15, 48], offers a complementary perspective focused on how people explain the causes of events in their lives. Heider described a form of everyday psychology in which people constantly try to make sense of the behavior of others, and themselves, by attributing it to either internal factors such as ability, effort, or personality, or external ones such as luck, situational pressure, or the difficulty of a task). Weiner extended this framework to the academic context, showing that the attributions students make about their successes and failures have a direct bearing on their motivation and persistence (Malle, 2022; Weiner, 1985)^[25, 49].

In the context of this study, attribution theory helps explain why students respond to challenges in such varied ways. A student who attributes a poor exam grade to insufficient effort is likely to study harder next time, an internal, controllable attribution that supports continued engagement. A student who believes they simply are not smart enough, however, may disengage entirely, an internal, uncontrollable attribution that undermines motivation (Graham, 2020)^[13]. Similarly, students who attribute their struggles to external factors beyond their control, such as an unfair teacher or an unstable home environment, may feel helpless to change their situation. Understanding these attribution patterns matters because they directly influence which coping strategies students are likely to adopt and how effective those strategies will be (Maymon *et al.*, 2018)^[24].

When taken together, these two theories frame school-related problems not just as isolated events, but as part of a broader, interconnected system shaped by the student's perceptions, relationships, and context. A freshman who sees a difficult course as a challenge to overcome, an internal and controllable attribution, and who has access to supportive peers and faculty, with a well-functioning system, is far more likely to cope adaptively than one who lacks these resources. This dual framework provides the conceptual foundation for examining the relationship between students' problems and their responses to those problems.

The Schematic Diagram

This study positions school-related problems and coping strategies as two interrelated components of the freshmen college experience, shaped by individual characteristics and contextual factors. The independent variables including sex, family structure, and place of residence, are understood to influence the dependent variables which are the types of problems students encounter and the strategies they are likely to use in response. The dependent variables presented are examined both separately and in relation to each other. The model does not assume a simple linear relationship but acknowledges the complex, dynamic interplay between these components, consistent with the systems and attribution perspective that informed its design.

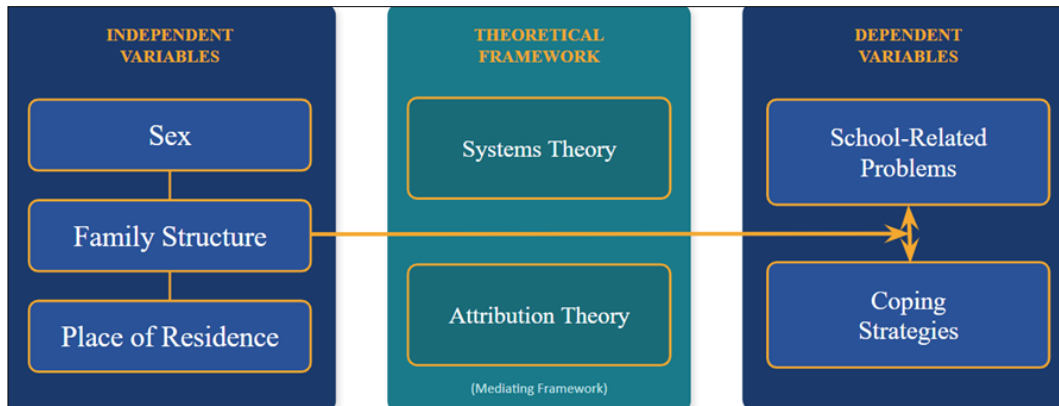


Fig 1: Conceptual model showing the relationship between student profile variables, school-related problems, and coping strategies.

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a descriptive research design to examine the school-related problems experienced by college freshmen and the coping strategies they used to manage those problems. Descriptive research is well suited for studies that aim to document and characterize conditions as they naturally exist within a given population, without any manipulation of variables (Fraenkel *et al.*, 2018) ^[10]. This approach is particularly appropriate for educational research that seeks to understand student experiences and behavioral patterns, since the goal is to provide an accurate picture of a real situation rather than to test a cause-and-effect relationship. Several recent studies on student stress and coping have similarly adopted descriptive designs to capture the breadth and variety of student experiences in higher education (Yikealo *et al.*, 2018 ^[50]; Pascoe *et al.*, 2019).

Sampling Procedure

The sample size was determined using Slovin's formula, a widely used approach for computing representative sample sizes from finite populations. After the required sample size was established, stratified random sampling was applied to ensure that students from each degree program were included in proportion to their share of the total population. This method is considered best practice for studies in which the population consists of distinct subgroups, as it helps ensure representativeness and reduces sampling bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) ^[8]. Within each stratum, participants were selected through a lottery technique, giving every eligible student an equal chance of being included in the study.

Participants

The study involved 355 college freshmen drawn from a total population of 3,131 first-year students enrolled at a higher education institution during the second semester of academic year 2024-2025^[38]. Participants came from seven degree programs: BS Engineering and Maritime Education (n = 83), BS Management and Accountancy (n = 110), BS Information Technology Education (n = 48), BS Criminology (n = 60), BS Education (n = 45), BS Nursing (n = 6), and BA Political Science (n = 3). Respondents were categorized according to sex, family structure, and place of residence.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a researcher-made questionnaire composed of two sections. The first section gathered

demographic information about the respondents, including their sex, family structure, and place of residence. The second section, which formed the core of the instrument, contained items addressing the frequency of specific school-related problems and the types of coping strategies employed by the students. Respondents rated each item on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). The mean scores were interpreted using the following scale: 4.21–5.00 (Always), 3.41–4.20 (Very Often), 2.61–3.40 (Often), 1.81–2.60 (Sometimes), and 1.00–1.80 (Never). Likert-type instruments are widely used in educational and social research due to their practicality and their ability to capture degrees of frequency or agreement in a structured and quantifiable way (Joshi *et al.*, 2015) ^[18].

Validity and Reliability

The questionnaire underwent face and content validation by a panel of academic experts using the eight-point criteria developed by Good and Scates. Content validity is an important first step in instrument development, as it ensures that the items adequately represent the domain of interest before reliability testing proceeds (Polit & Beck, 2021) ^[33]. Following the panel's review, the instrument was revised to incorporate their recommendations before it was finalized. Reliability testing was then conducted with 30 freshmen students from another higher education institution, who were not part of the actual study sample. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess internal consistency, yielding a coefficient of 0.83, well above the generally accepted threshold of 0.70 for research instruments (Taber, 2018) ^[41]. This value indicates that the questionnaire demonstrated satisfactory reliability and was therefore suitable for use in the main study.

Data Collection

Following institutional approval from the university administrator, the researcher personally distributed and retrieved the questionnaires from the participants. Personal administration helped ensure a high response rate and allowed the researcher to clarify any questions from participants on the spot. All completed questionnaires were then organized and prepared for statistical analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) v30. Descriptive statistics, including frequency counts, percentages, means, and ranks, were computed to characterize the respondents' profiles, the

prevalence of specific school-related problems, and the frequency with which various coping strategies were used. To determine whether significant differences existed in students' problems and coping strategies when grouped by sex, family structure, and place of residence, the independent samples t-test was applied at the 0.05 level of significance. Pearson's Product-Moment Coefficient of Correlation (Pearson *r*), also set at the 0.05 level, was used to examine whether a significant relationship existed between the school-related problems experienced by students and the coping strategies they employed.

Results and Discussions

School-Related Problems Experienced by Freshmen Students

On the whole, freshmen students reported encountering school-related problems only 'Sometimes,' with an overall mean of 2.54 on a five-point scale. While this may sound reassuring at first glance, the data reveal a more nuanced picture when individual items are examined closely. Several problems clustered toward the higher end of the scale, suggesting that certain challenges, particularly those tied to self-regulation, goal orientation, and emotional management, are quite real and persistent for first-year students.

The three most frequently reported school-related problems were: difficulty in managing time well (*M*=3.39, Rank 1); difficulty in setting goals (*M*=3.37, Rank 2); and difficulty in handling emotions (*M*=3.31, Rank 3). These findings are consistently indicating that the transition from secondary to higher education places extraordinary demands on students' self-regulatory capacities. Credé and Kuncel's (2008) [7] foundational work on study skills, as extended by more recent investigations, has confirmed that students who enter college without strong time management and goal-setting habits are significantly more likely to experience academic difficulties in their first year (Walck-Shannon *et al.*, 2021) [46].

The fact that time management tops the list is not surprising. Many freshmen are, for the first time, entirely responsible for structuring their own academic schedule, balancing coursework with social life, and meeting deadlines without the scaffolding that secondary school typically provides.

Adams and Blair (2019) [1], found that poor time management was one of the single most consistent predictors of academic underperformance among first-year undergraduates, a finding that appears to hold regardless of cultural or institutional context. For students at a Philippine university, this challenge is compounded by the reality that many are simultaneously managing family obligations, long commutes, and financial pressures, leaving them with little structured time for academic work (Retuya *et al.*, 2017; Samillano, 2026) [35, 39].

The second-ranked problem, difficulty in setting goals, speaks to a broader developmental challenge. Goal-setting is a foundational component of academic self-regulation, students who have a clear sense of what they are working toward tend to persist longer and perform better even in the face of setbacks (Honicke & Broadbent, 2016) [16]. When goals are vague or absent, students are more likely to feel adrift, to procrastinate, and to become overwhelmed by the day-to-day demands of coursework. This is especially common among freshmen who may not yet have a strong sense of why they chose their degree program or what they hope to accomplish.

Difficulty in handling emotions, ranked third, reflects the emotional turbulence that characterizes early college life. Research on college student well-being has consistently found that emotional dysregulation, that is, difficulty recognizing, understanding, and managing one's own emotional states, is associated with higher levels of academic stress, lower academic performance, and greater risk of dropout (Lipson *et al.*, 2018) [3]. Social and emotional learning (SEL) frameworks as cited by Cipriano *et al.*, (2023) [6], have long argued that students' emotional competencies are just as important to academic success as their cognitive abilities. Students who struggle to manage their emotions are less able to concentrate in class, less likely to seek help when they need it, and more vulnerable to the cumulative effects of academic stress (Zhang, 2025) [51].

Table 1 presents the full distribution of school-related problems reported by the respondents, ranked from most to least frequently experience.

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents on School-Related Problems When Taken as a Whole Group

School-Related Problem	Mean	Interpretation	Rank
Having poor physical health	2.03	Sometimes	27
Lacking food intake before going to school	2.21	Sometimes	23
Travelling long distances from home to school	2.78	Often	9
Being intimidated by schoolmates	2.07	Sometimes	26
Having financial constraints	2.69	Often	13
Disliking my course	1.56	Never	30
Missing my family	2.49	Sometimes	16
Feeling inferior in school	1.99	Sometimes	28
Abstaining from smoking or drinking	1.94	Sometimes	29
Eating lavishly	2.03	Sometimes	24
Difficulty: Rejecting influence of friends to drink liquor	2.41	Sometimes	21
Difficulty: Refraining from hanging out in malls	2.42	Sometimes	20
Difficulty: Controlling the self to skip classes	2.73	Often	11
Difficulty: Not going with friends partying	2.43	Sometimes	19
Difficulty: Accommodating friends, classmates and peers	2.72	Often	12
Difficulty: Avoiding verbal harassment by peers	2.64	Often	15
Difficulty: Adjusting with high expectations from parents	2.79	Often	8
Difficulty: Attending sick family members	2.46	Sometimes	17
Difficulty: Being nagged by family members and friends	2.24	Sometimes	22

Difficulty: Dealing with step family members	2.08	Sometimes	25
Difficulty: Conforming with teachers' ideas and opinions	2.91	Often	6
Difficulty: Managing time well	3.39	Often	1
Difficulty: Avoiding being hooked on watching TV	2.68	Often	14
Difficulty: Adjusting with friends and roommates	2.79	Often	7
Difficulty: Concentrating because of external noise	2.73	Often	10
Difficulty: Controlling depression	2.97	Often	4
Difficulty: Not playing video games	2.46	Sometimes	18
Difficulty: Handling emotions	3.21	Often	3
Difficulty: Setting goals	3.37	Often	2
Difficulty: Verbal communications	2.96	Often	5
Overall Mean	2.54	Sometimes	—

School-Related Problems by Demographic Subgroup

When the data were examined by demographic subgroup, some interesting patterns emerged, though the overall ranking of top problems remained broadly consistent across categories.

Among male students, the three most pressing problems were difficulty in setting goals ($M=3.36$), managing time well ($M=3.33$), and handling emotions ($M=3.18$). Female students reported a nearly identical profile, with the order of the first two items reversed, managing time well ($M=3.34$), setting goals ($M=3.33$), and handling emotions ($M=3.19$). The similarity across sex lines is notable and suggests that the challenges of academic self-regulation in the first year are not primarily shaped by sex, but by the shared experience of transition into higher education.

Students living with one or both parents reported their top three problems as difficulty in setting goals ($M=3.42$), managing time well ($M=3.39$), and handling emotions ($M=3.19$), all of which are academic or self-regulatory in nature. In contrast, students not living with their parents showed a somewhat different pattern. Their most frequently reported problems were difficulty in managing time well and in handling emotions (both $M=3.39$), followed by

difficulty in controlling depression ($M=3.12$). The emergence of depression as a key concern for students living independently is a finding that deserves close attention. Living away from family can mean losing access to a critical source of emotional support, while simultaneously facing the demands of managing one's own household, finances, and social life, a combination that significantly elevates the risk of psychological distress (Mudhovozi, 2017) [35].

By place of residence, urban students' top three problems were difficulty in setting goals ($M=3.43$), managing time well ($M=3.38$), and handling emotions ($M=3.28$). Rural students, meanwhile, reported difficulty in managing time well ($M=3.39$), setting goals ($M=3.32$), and controlling depression ($M=3.09$) as their most pressing concerns. The presence of depression in the rural subgroup's top three, similar to the pattern among students not living with parents, may reflect the added stressors faced by students who have relocated from rural communities, including social displacement, cultural adjustment, and reduced access to familiar support networks (Usman *et al.*, 2026) [40].

Table 2 presents the top three school-related problems for each demographic subgroup.

Table 2: Top Three School-Related Problems When Classified According to Demographic Variables

Variable / Subgroup	Mean	Interpretation	Rank	School-Related Problem
Sex: Male (n=152)	3.36	Often	1	Difficulty in setting goals
	3.33	Often	2	Difficulty in managing time well
	3.18	Often	3	Difficulty in handling emotions
Sex: Female (n=203)	3.34	Often	1	Difficulty in managing time well
	3.33	Often	2	Difficulty in setting goals
	3.19	Often	3	Difficulty in handling emotions
Family Structure: Living with parents (n=314)	3.42	Very Often	1	Difficulty in setting goals
	3.39	Often	2	Difficulty in managing time well
	3.19	Often	3	Difficulty in handling emotions
Family Structure: Not living with parents (n=41)	3.39	Often	1-2	Difficulty in managing time well
	3.39	Often	1-2	Difficulty in handling emotions
	3.12	Often	3	Difficulty in controlling depression
Place of Residence: Urban (n=179)	3.43	Very Often	1	Difficulty in setting goals
	3.38	Often	2	Difficulty in managing time well
	3.28	Often	3	Difficulty in handling emotions
Place of Residence: Rural (n=176)	3.39	Often	1	Difficulty in managing time well
	3.32	Often	2	Difficulty in setting goals
	3.09	Often	3	Difficulty in controlling depression

Significance of Differences in School-Related Problems

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to determine whether statistically significant differences existed in the school-related problems experienced by students when grouped by sex, family structure, and place of residence. Results showed no significant differences across all three variables.

Male students reported a slightly higher mean ($M=2.57$) than females ($M=2.51$), but the difference was not statistically significant ($t=.922$, $p=.357$). This result is consistent with findings from several recent studies suggesting that the overall burden of school-related stress in the first year of college is broadly similar for male and female students, even when the specific nature of their concerns may differ somewhat (Gefen and Fish, 2019) [12].

For family structure, students not living with their parents reported a marginally higher mean ($M=2.58$) compared to those living with parents ($M=2.54$), but this difference was also non-significant ($t=-.563$, $p=.574$). Similarly, rural students ($M=2.56$) reported slightly higher overall problem scores than urban students ($M=2.52$), but this gap did not reach statistical significance ($t=-.695$, $p=.488$). The absence of significant differences across these variables suggests that school-related problems in the first year of

college are a broadly shared phenomenon rather than a condition concentrated in any particular demographic group (Chongjin *et al.*, 2025) [5]. This has practical implications for student support services where programs designed to help students manage academic stress do not need to be narrowly targeted but can benefit the student population as a whole (Nordstokke and Hindes, 2025) [29].

Table 3 presents the t-test results for each demographic variable.

Table 3: Significant Differences in School-Related Problems When Classified According to Demographic Variables.

Category	N	Mean	df	T	p value	Remarks
Sex: Male	152	2.57	353	.922	.357	Not Significant
Sex: Female	203	2.51				
Family Structure: Living with parents	314	2.54	353	-.563	.574	Not Significant
Family Structure: Not living with parents	41	2.58				
Place of Residence: Urban	179	2.52	353	-.695	.488	Not Significant
Place of Residence: Rural	176	2.56				

$p < .05$ = Significant.

Coping Strategies Employed by Freshmen Students

Despite the challenges they face, freshmen students demonstrated an active, if informal, repertoire of coping strategies. The overall mean for coping strategy use was 2.78, indicating that students used these strategies 'Often' on average. The three most frequently employed strategies across the whole group were listening to music ($M=4.07$, Rank 1), laughing with friends ($M=3.90$, Rank 2), and watching TV programs, shows, drama, or musical presentations ($M=3.39$, Rank 3).

These findings are interesting on several levels. The dominance of music-listening as a coping strategy aligns well with a growing body of psychological research on the emotional regulation functions of music. Rodriguez and Gonzalez (2024) [36] demonstrated that music can serve as an effective buffer against physiological stress responses, reducing cortisol levels and promoting subjective feelings of calm and well-being. For college students who may not have easy access to professional counseling or formal support services, music offers a readily available, low-cost means of emotional regulation (Fountain *et al.*, 2026) [11]. Laughing with friends, the second most common strategy, speaks to the centrality of social connection as a buffer against stress (McLean *et al.*, 2022) [25]. Research has consistently shown

that social support, whether instrumental, emotional, or simply companionate, is one of the strongest protective factors against the negative effects of academic stress (Ruihua *et al.*, 2025) [37].

It is worth noting that the most commonly used strategies are primarily emotion-focused rather than problem-focused. That is, students are tending to manage how they feel about their problems rather than directly addressing the sources of those problems. While emotion-focused coping strategies are not inherently unhelpful, and are often essential in situations where direct problem-solving is not immediately possible, an over-reliance on them can sometimes prevent students from taking the practical steps needed to resolve their academic difficulties (Chongjin *et al.*, 2025; Ra and Shin, 2025). Yikealo *et al.* (2018) [5, 34, 50] found that students who relied primarily on avoidance and emotion-focused strategies reported higher levels of academic stress over time, even as they felt temporarily better after using them. This suggests that helping students develop a more balanced coping repertoire, one that includes both emotion-focused strategies for immediate relief and problem-focused strategies for longer-term resolution, should be a priority for student support programs (Perez-Jorge *et al.*, 2025) [32].

Table 4 shows the full distribution of coping strategies and their corresponding means and ranks.

Table 4: Distribution of Respondents on Coping Strategies When Taken as a Whole Group

Coping Strategy	Mean	Interpretation	Rank
Keeping it to myself	3.07	Often	9
Pretending not to be affected	2.77	Often	16
Having drinking/smoking session with friends	1.42	Never	30
Playing computer games or surfing the internet	2.42	Sometimes	23
Chatting with friends online or by phone	2.97	Often	11
Staying alone in my room	2.60	Sometimes	21
Watching TV programs, shows, drama or musicals	3.39	Often	3
Reading books, pocketbooks or magazines	2.94	Often	12
Eating a lot	2.84	Often	14
Sleeping	3.28	Often	4
Crying	3.28	Often	4
Going to church / praying	3.15	Often	8
Joining clubs or organizations in school	2.24	Sometimes	28
Playing guitar or other musical instruments	1.95	Sometimes	29
Singing	2.67	Often	19

Dancing	2.72	Often	18
Writing	2.84	Often	14
Telling my family about my problem	2.73	Often	17
Attending physical exercise program / aerobics	2.40	Sometimes	24
Listening to music	4.07	Very Often	1
Window shopping / malling	2.64	Often	20
Going to the beach with friends	2.27	Sometimes	27
Buying something for myself	2.93	Often	13
Joy riding in a public utility vehicle	2.44	Sometimes	22
Laughing with friends	3.90	Very Often	2
Doing household chores at home	3.28	Often	4
Gardening	2.40	Sometimes	24
Playing with my pet	2.31	Sometimes	26
Getting outdoors to enjoy nature	3.22	Often	7
Practicing deep breathing	3.01	Often	10
Overall Mean	2.78	Often	—

Coping Strategies by Demographic Subgroup

When coping strategies were examined by subgroup, both similarities and meaningful differences emerged across categories.

Both male (M=3.93) and female (M=4.19) students ranked listening to music as their primary coping strategy, followed by laughing with friends (M=3.59 for males; M=4.14 for females). However, males listed sleeping as their third strategy (M=3.21), while females preferred watching TV programs, shows, or musicals (M=3.58). Female students also reported somewhat higher means for social and entertainment-based strategies overall, suggesting a slightly stronger tendency toward social engagement as a means of emotional relief. This is broadly consistent with research on gender differences in coping, which has found that women generally report greater use of social support and emotion-focused strategies compared to men (Graves *et al.*, 2021; Theodoratou *et al.*, 2023) [14, 42].

For students living with their parents, the top strategies were watching TV programs or musicals (M=3.37), doing household chores (M=3.28), and getting outdoors to enjoy nature (M=3.26). The presence of household chores in this list is noteworthy, for students living in a family environment, engagement in domestic routines may serve as

a grounding activity that provides a sense of normalcy and contribution (Hou *et al.*, 2020) [17]. Students not living with their parents, on the other hand, preferred laughing with friends (M=3.80), listening to music (M=3.78), and doing household chores (M=3.24). The relatively heavier reliance on social coping among students living independently is consistent with the idea that these students, lacking the day-to-day emotional support of family, may turn more actively to peers to fill that gap (Lyell *et al.*, 2020; Alsubaie *et al.*, 2019) [2, 23].

By place of residence, urban students' top three strategies were laughing with friends (M=4.07), sleeping (M=3.40), and doing household chores (M=3.40). Rural students' top three were listening to music (M=4.05), laughing with friends (M=3.74), and watching TV programs or musicals (M=3.24). While the specific rankings differ somewhat, the overall picture across all subgroups is one of students leaning heavily on social and recreational strategies to manage stress, a pattern that is both understandable and, within limits, healthy (Kumar *et al.*, 2022; Elgar *et al.*, 2003) [9, 19].

Table 5 presents the top three coping strategies for each demographic subgroup.

Table 5: Top Three Coping Strategies When Classified According to Demographic Variables

Variable / Subgroup	Mean	Interpretation	Rank	Coping Strategy
Sex: Male (n=152)	3.93	Very Often	1	Listening to music
	3.59	Very Often	2	Laughing with friends
	3.21	Often	3	Sleeping
Sex: Female (n=203)	4.19	Very Often	1	Listening to music
	4.14	Very Often	2	Laughing with friends
	3.58	Very Often	3	Watching TV programs, shows, or musicals
Family Structure: Living with parents (n=314)	3.37	Often	1	Watching TV programs, shows, or musicals
	3.28	Often	2	Doing household chores
	3.26	Often	3	Getting outdoors to enjoy nature
Family Structure: Not living with parents (n=41)	3.80	Very Often	1	Laughing with friends
	3.78	Very Often	2	Listening to music
	3.24	Often	3	Doing household chores
Place of Residence: Urban (n=179)	4.07	Very Often	1	Laughing with friends
	3.40	Often	2-3	Sleeping
	3.40	Often	2-3	Doing household chores
Place of Residence: Rural (n=176)	4.05	Very Often	1	Listening to music
	3.74	Very Often	2	Laughing with friends
	3.24	Often	3	Watching TV programs, shows, or musicals

Significance of Differences in Coping Strategies

T-tests were conducted to determine whether demographic variables were associated with significant differences in coping strategy use. Results showed a significant difference in coping strategies between male and female students ($t=2.29, p =.023$), but no significant differences by family structure or place of residence.

Males reported a higher overall mean for coping strategy use ($M=2.82$) compared to females ($M=2.69$), and this difference was statistically significant. On the surface, this might seem counterintuitive given that female students tended to score higher on individual social and emotional strategies. However, the overall mean captures the breadth of coping strategy use across all 30 items, and males may have reported more frequent use of certain strategies such as sleeping, playing video games, or physical activity that

offset lower scores on emotional strategies. This finding that males and females differ in their coping profiles even when their problem profiles are similar and is consistent with the results of broader cross-cultural research on gender and coping (Graves *et al.*, 2021; Theodoratou *et al.*, 2023) ^[14, 27]. Neither family structure (living with parents: $M=2.77$; not living with parents: $M=2.74$; $t=.316, p =.752$) nor place of residence (urban: $M=2.81$; rural: $M=2.73$; $t=.171, p =.488$) yielded significant differences in overall coping strategy use. This suggests that while the specific strategies students prefer may vary by context, the overall frequency and variety of coping behaviors do not differ substantially across these groupings.

Table 6 presents the t-test results for coping strategy differences.

Table 6: Significant Differences in Coping Strategies When Classified According to Demographic Variables. $p < .05 =$ Significant.

Category	N	Mean	df	T	p value	Remarks
Sex: Male	152	2.82	353	2.29	.023	Significant
Sex: Female	203	2.69				
Family Structure: Living with parents	314	2.77	353	.316	.752	Not Significant
Family Structure: Not living with parents	41	2.74				
Place of Residence: Urban	179	2.81	353	.171	.488	Not Significant
Place of Residence: Rural	176	2.73				

Relationship between School-Related Problems and Coping Strategies

A Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between students' school-related problems and their use of coping strategies. The analysis revealed a statistically significant positive correlation ($r=.441, p =.001$) between the two variables, indicating that students who reported experiencing more school-related problems also tended to report greater use of coping strategies.

This finding is both theoretically meaningful and practically important. From the perspective of systems theory, it confirms that students are not passive recipients of stress, they actively respond to the problems they encounter by deploying coping mechanisms, in an effort to restore a sense of balance and well-being. Attribution theory offers an additional interpretive layer where students who believe their problems are manageable, an internal and controllable attribution, are more likely to engage actively in coping, while those who feel helpless are less likely to do so. The significant correlation found here suggests that, at least at the population level, freshmen students at higher education institution are broadly engaged in adaptive coping as they recognize their problems and they do something about them (Ruiz-Camacho *et al.*, 2025) ^[38].

The moderate strength of the correlation ($r=.441$) is also worth commenting on. It is strong enough to be meaningful, but not so strong as to suggest that problem severity alone determines coping behavior. Other factors including personality, social support, prior experience with adversity, and the specific nature of the problem encountered, also play important roles. This is consistent with the broader literature on stress and coping, which has consistently found that the relationship between stressors and coping responses is mediated by a range of individual and contextual factors (Mkumbo *et al.*, 2023^[27]; Pascoe *et al.*, 2019).

These findings collectively underscore the importance of understanding not just what problems students face, but how

they respond to them. For educators and student support professionals, this means that interventions should address both sides of the equation, reducing unnecessary sources of stress where possible, while also helping students build a richer and more effective coping toolkit (Park and Slattery, 2026; Samillano, 2026) ^[30]. Programs that teach time management skills, goal-setting strategies, and basic emotional regulation techniques have been shown to be particularly effective in the first year of college, when students are most vulnerable to the compounding effects of multiple stressors (Adams & Blair, 2019) ^[1].

Table 7: Relationship between School-Related Problems and Coping Strategies.

Variable	N	Pearson r	p value	Remarks
School-Related Problems	355	.441	.001	Significant
Coping Strategies	355			

Conclusions

Freshmen students experienced school-related problems and while these challenges are real and recurring, they are not constantly overwhelming. The three most frequently reported problems include difficulty in managing time well, difficulty in setting goals, and difficulty in handling emotions, all reflect deficits in self-regulation, including the capacity to plan, monitor, and direct one's own behavior and emotional states in pursuit of academic goals. These challenges are deeply intertwined, a student struggling emotionally is less able to manage time, and a student falling behind academically is more likely to feel anxious or depressed. Self-regulatory skills was identified as among the strongest predictors of first-year success and persistence, underscoring the need for institutions to address these skills proactively rather than waiting for students to visibly fail. Pressures of the first year of college are broadly shared rather than concentrated in any particular demographic group. This supports the design of universal rather than narrowly targeted support programs, interventions built into

the first-year experience for all students are more likely to reach those who need them most. However, closer examination of subgroup patterns reveals meaningful nuance, students not living with their parents and those from rural areas were more likely to identify depression as a top concern, pointing to the added emotional burden of social displacement and the loss of familiar support networks for students navigating the transition to college life away from home.

Freshmen students demonstrated an active coping repertoire, the most commonly used strategies, listening to music, laughing with friends, and watching TV programs or shows, are broadly positive and socially oriented. Music has been shown to regulate mood and reduce physiological stress responses, while social laughter activates neurobiological processes linked to well-being and peer bonding. While these emotion-focused strategies offer genuine short-term relief, they do not directly address the underlying sources of stress. A well-rounded coping repertoire should also include problem-focused strategies, such as time management planning, goal-setting, and help-seeking, and building this balance among students should be an explicit goal of first-year support programs.

A difference in coping was found between male and female students, while both groups shared the same top two strategies, males tended toward sleeping while females preferred media and entertainment, a pattern consistent with broader cross-cultural research on gender and coping. A positive correlation was found between school-related problems and coping strategy use, confirming that students who face more difficulties also exert more effort to manage them. This reflects genuine resilience and a tendency to make internal, controllable attributions about academic challenges, a mindset that attribution model links directly to motivation and persistence.

Taken together, these findings carry clear implications for practice. Institutions should integrate explicit instruction in time management, goal-setting, and emotional regulation into the first-year curriculum, while building proactive outreach mechanisms for students living independently or transitioning from rural communities. Support services should be differentiated enough to account for gender differences in coping preferences, and mental health resources should be made genuinely accessible and free of stigma. Above all, the significant correlation between problems and coping shows that the first-year college student is not a passive recipient of stress but an active problem-solver working with whatever resources are available. The role of the institution is to make sure those resources are rich enough, varied enough, and close enough at hand that no student has to navigate the pressures of college life alone.

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