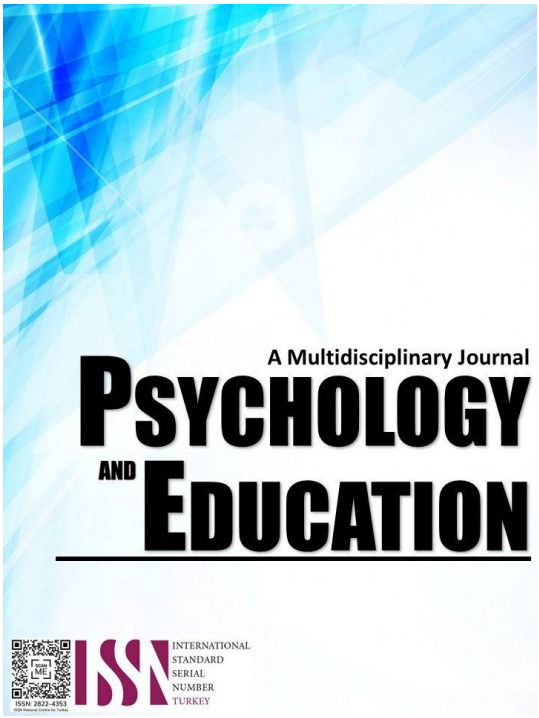
THE PRESSURE-TO-PERFORM: FINANCIAL STRESS AS DRIVER OF ACADEMIC MOTIVATION AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS



PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATION: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL

Volume: 50
Issue 9
Pages: 1035-1041
Document ID: 2025PEMJ4919
DOI: 10.70838/pemj.500903
Manuscript Accepted: 12-16-2025

Psych Educ, 2025, **50**(9): 1035-1041, Document ID:2025PEMJ4919, doi:10.70838/pemj.500903, ISSN 2822-4353

Research Article

The Pressure-to-Perform: Financial Stress as Driver of Academic Motivation among College Students

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Abstract

Financial stress is a growing concern in higher education, often linked to rising tuition costs and increasing individual financial responsibility. This descriptive correlational study examined the relationship between financial stress and student motivation among 111 college students in Bulacan, utilizing adopted survey instruments and Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation. The findings revealed that overall financial stress was moderate, manifesting most prominently in affective domains such as anxiety and fear. Student motivation was generally high, primarily driven by strong extrinsic, grade-oriented factors, particularly improving GPA and demonstrating ability to family and employers. The core finding showed a weak but statistically significant positive relationship between financial stress and student motivation. This suggests that financial pressure may serve as a "pressure-to-perform" motivator, slightly increasing academic striving among students focused on extrinsic rewards, such as grades and scholarships. Although not a critical threat to academic standing in this sample, it highlights the need for institutional support that balances financial aid with strategies to foster self-efficacy and mastery-oriented learning, thereby mitigating the risk of burnout associated with purely extrinsic motivation.

Keywords: *financial stress, student motivation, higher education, extrinsic motivation, correlational study*

Introduction

Financial stress has become an increasingly pressing concern in higher education, reflecting broader global trends of rising tuition costs, widening socioeconomic disparities, and the growing expectation that individuals bear greater financial responsibility for their education. These economic realities create complex challenges for students, shaping not only their capacity to meet academic demands but also their psychological and motivational outlook, as Schulz (2025) emphasizes. Financial constraints and related stressors can diminish academic self-concept, self-efficacy, and motivation, factors that are critical determinants of persistence and achievement in higher education.

Financial stress is commonly defined as a psychological and emotional state characterized by worry, anxiety, and fear regarding financial sufficiency and debt ownership (Campbell, 2021; Rahman et al., 2021). It arises when individuals perceive that their available resources are insufficient to meet responsibilities and needs (Rahman et al., 2021). Within the academic context, this stress can be understood through frameworks such as Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT), which explains how students' perceptions of value and expectancy influence their task choices, persistence, and performance (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). EVT highlights how financial strain may undermine students' perceived value of education or their confidence in succeeding, thereby influencing their motivation and academic outcomes.

Student motivation, on the other hand, governs the direction, intensity, and persistence of engagement in learning, shaping both achievement and overall success (Steinmayr et al., 2019; Howard, 2020). Motivation is multifaceted, encompassing both intrinsic and extrinsic drivers, and is central to educational outcomes as articulated in Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Theoretical perspectives such as SDT, EVT, achievement goal theory, and social cognitive theory provide structured frameworks for understanding how personal values, goals, self-efficacy beliefs, and social contexts interact to influence motivation (Howard, 2020; Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2023). These perspectives highlight the significance of examining how external pressures, including financial stress, interact with students' internal motivational processes.

The connection between financial stress and student motivation has therefore become an important area of inquiry in higher education research. Financial strain is suggested to indirectly affect students through perceived stress, which can lead to psychological symptoms and hinder academic and social integration (Adams et al., 2016). Ansari and Iqbal (2025) further highlight the role of financial resilience, which encompasses financial literacy, access to resources, and positive financial behaviors, in mitigating the negative impacts of economic adversity on mental health and subjective well-being. Despite extensive research, findings on the relationship between financial stress and motivation remain inconsistent and sometimes contradictory, varying across cultural and educational contexts. This inconsistency underscores the need for localized studies that capture the nuances of student experiences in specific settings.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to investigate the relationship between financial stress and student motivation among college students in Bulacan. Specifically, it aims to address the following questions: How can financial stress be measured? How can student motivation in learning be assessed? Moreover, is there a significant relationship between students' financial stress levels and their learning motivation?

By exploring these questions, this study contributes to the growing discourse on how financial challenges shape academic engagement. It offers empirical evidence from a Philippine context, where socioeconomic disparities and rising educational costs present unique challenges for students. The findings are expected to inform institutional policies and interventions that balance financial aid with motivational supports, thereby fostering resilience, self-efficacy, and mastery-oriented learning. More broadly, the study advances theoretical understanding of how financial stress interacts with motivational frameworks, while offering practical insights for educators, policymakers, and student support services seeking to sustain academic performance amid economic pressures.

Literature Review

Financial stress is widely recognized as a multidimensional construct that extends beyond mere economic hardship, encompassing psychological discomfort, affective reactions, and relational consequences. Archuleta et al. (2021) emphasize its impact on well-being and academic outcomes, while Heo et al. (2020) conceptualize it through the APR Financial Stress Scale, which captures affective, physiological, and relational dimensions. Simonse et al. (2024) similarly frame financial stress as a state of imbalance between financial demands and coping resources, aligning with general stress theory. Taken together, these perspectives highlight that financial stress is not only about insufficient funds but also about the subjective perception of vulnerability, which can manifest in anxiety, depression, or strained social relationships. In the academic context, Lim and Heckman (2020) note that tuition fees, debt, and living costs compound this stress, directly influencing students' mental health and academic performance.

Motivation, conversely, is often described as the driving force behind persistence and achievement. Peprah et al. (2019) define it as the factor that sustains students' engagement in learning, while Zhang and Lin (2022) stress the interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic drivers. The Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020) emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness as essential for sustained motivation, whereas expectancy-value and achievement goal theories focus on the roles of perceived value, self-efficacy, and goal orientation (Howard, 2020; Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2023). These frameworks converge on the idea that motivation is not static but shaped by contextual pressures, including financial stress, which can either undermine or reinforce academic striving.

Empirical studies, however, reveal divergent findings on the interaction between financial stress and motivation and performance. Peprah et al. (2019) report a high correlation between financial stress and learning motivation, suggesting that financial strain can heighten academic drive, particularly among international students. Similarly, Uman and Banu (2019) found that financially stressed students in India exhibited lower grades, linking financial constraints directly to diminished academic performance. Moore et al. (2021) extend this view by showing that financial stress not only affects academics but also social integration, as students often feel isolated when comparing themselves to wealthier peers. These findings collectively suggest that financial stress can erode both academic and social functioning.

However, other studies complicate this narrative. House et al. (2020) highlight that first-generation students are disproportionately burdened by debt and long working hours, often leading to dropout risks, while Bergmann et al. (2019) and Pisaniello et al. (2019) show that medical students under financial strain tend to compromise academic performance or select specializations based on financial returns rather than intrinsic interest. These findings underscore the long-term consequences of financial stress, where coping strategies may involve trade-offs that undermine educational quality or career satisfaction. In contrast, Tayebi and Gomez (2021) argue that the lack of motivation and dropout tendencies among engineering students in Spain were not primarily driven by financial constraints but by academic difficulties and poor relationships with professors. This divergence suggests that financial stress is not universally predictive of motivation or performance; contextual, cultural, and institutional factors mediate its effects.

Critically, these contrasting findings highlight a tension in the literature: while some evidence supports the "pressure-to-perform" hypothesis, where financial stress fuels extrinsic motivation (e.g., striving for grades, scholarships, or recognition), other studies caution that excessive stress can undermine persistence and well-being. The inconsistency across contexts underscores the need for localized research that accounts for cultural, institutional, and socioeconomic differences. For instance, resilience factors such as financial literacy, social support, and institutional aid (Ansari & Iqbal, 2025) may buffer adverse effects, explaining why some students sustain motivation despite financial strain. Thus, the literature suggests that financial stress operates as a double-edged sword, capable of motivating performance in some cases while eroding academic and psychological outcomes in others.

Methodology

Research Design

This study utilized a descriptive correlational research design. The descriptive aspect allowed the study to present a clear picture of the levels of financial stress and student motivation among college students in Bulacan. Meanwhile, the correlational component was employed to examine the possible relationship between these two variables. A correlational design was deemed most appropriate because the study did not attempt to manipulate or control variables, but instead sought to determine whether financial stress is associated with changes in student motivation. By adopting this design, the researcher was able to capture the natural conditions students experience and provide insights into how financial challenges may influence their academic drive.

Respondents

The population of interest consisted of college students enrolled in various institutions within Bulacan. Since the exact number of students was unknown, the researcher targeted 111 respondents as a representative sample. According to Fox (2024), a minimum of 100 respondents in a quantitative study is sufficient to detect relationships between variables. Meanwhile, to ensure fairness and minimize bias, the study employed simple random sampling, ensuring that each student had an equal chance of being selected. This sampling technique was chosen because it enhances the representativeness of the sample and strengthens the validity of the findings.

The respondents in this study were limited to undergraduate college students currently enrolled in higher education institutions in Bulacan, as they represent the population most directly experiencing financial stress related to academic motivation. The inclusion criteria required that participants be officially registered during the academic term of data collection, possess a sufficient comprehension of the English-language survey instrument, and provide complete responses with informed consent. Exclusion criteria, on the other hand, excluded individuals who were not enrolled in Bulacan-based institutions, those at the college level or below, graduate students, working professionals, and respondents who either declined consent or submitted incomplete or inconsistent answers. These parameters ensured that the study focused specifically on the academic and financial realities of undergraduate students in Bulacan, thereby enhancing the validity and contextual relevance of the findings.

Instrument

The primary tool for data collection was an adopted questionnaire that measured both financial stress and student motivation. The questionnaire for student motivation was adopted from the study of Bin Dayel et al. (2018). The financial stress questionnaire was adopted from the study by Heo et al. (2020). The instrument was structured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), which allowed respondents to express the intensity of their agreement with each statement. The use of a Likert scale was advantageous because it provided quantifiable data while capturing the nuances of student perceptions (McLeod, 2023). To ensure the instrument's quality, it underwent expert validation to confirm that the items were relevant and aligned with the constructs being measured. Reliability testing was also conducted, and the instrument yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.71 for student motivation and 0.74 for financial stress, indicating good internal consistency and suggesting that the items reliably measured the intended variables.

Procedure

Data collection was conducted through an online survey administered via Google Forms. This method was selected due to its accessibility, efficiency, and ability to reach a wide range of respondents without geographical limitations. The questionnaire link was distributed via email and social media, ensuring that students from different institutions in Bulacan could participate. Before answering, participants were provided with clear instructions and an informed consent statement embedded in the form. They were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and informed that participation was voluntary. The online format also minimized logistical challenges, reduced costs, and enabled automatic recording of responses, facilitating easier data management and analysis.

Data Analysis

The collected data were processed using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics, such as the mean and standard deviation, were computed to summarize levels of financial stress and student motivation, providing an overview of central tendencies and variability in the responses. For the inferential analysis, Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation was employed to examine the relationship between financial stress and student motivation. This non-parametric test was chosen because the data were ordinal and did not assume normality, making it appropriate for Likert-scale responses.

In interpreting correlation values, coefficients close to 0 indicate a very weak relationship, while values further from 0 reflect stronger associations. To guide interpretation, effect size thresholds were defined as follows: values below 0.30 represent a weak relationship, values between 0.30 and 0.50 indicate a moderate relationship, and values above 0.50 suggest a strong relationship. Reporting these thresholds provides clarity on the practical significance of the findings beyond statistical significance. Additionally, 95% confidence intervals for the correlation coefficients were calculated to indicate the precision of the estimates and account for sampling variability. These intervals allow readers to assess the reliability of the observed relationships, ensuring that conclusions are not based solely on point estimates but also on the range within which the actual population parameter is likely to fall.

Ethical Considerations

This study strictly adhered to established ethical standards in conducting research involving human participants. Prior to data collection, formal ethics approval was sought and obtained from the appropriate academic review committee of Bulacan State University, ensuring that the study complied with institutional and national requirements. All participants were provided with an informed consent statement that clearly outlined the purpose of the research, procedures involved, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was ensured by collecting no identifying information and reporting responses only in aggregate. Regarding data management, retention, and disposal, survey responses were stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the researchers. Data will be retained for 5 years to facilitate verification and follow-up studies. After this period, all electronic records will be permanently deleted to prevent unauthorized access. Handling procedures followed strict protocols to

minimize risks to participants, including anonymization of responses and restricted access to raw data. The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Belmont Report (respect for persons, beneficence, and justice) and aligned with the provisions of the Philippine Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act 10173), which safeguards the privacy and confidentiality of personal information. By following these guidelines, the researchers ensured that participants' rights, dignity, and welfare were protected throughout the research process.

Results and Discussion

Table 1. *Financial Stress*

Statements	*Mean*	*Stdev*	*Verbal Interpretation*
I feel depressed because of my financial situation.	3.29	1.02	Neutral
I feel hopeless because of my financial situation.	2.86	1.07	Neutral
I feel sad because of my financial situation.	3.5	1.06	Agree
I am not confident about myself because of my financial situation.	3.06	1.15	Neutral
I feel lonely because of my financial situation.	2.61	1.20	Neutral
I lose interest in my daily activities because of my financial situation.	2.83	1.17	Neutral
I am fearful because of my financial situation.	3.41	1.12	Agree
I feel anxious because of my financial situation.	3.7	1.12	Agree
I worry a lot because of my financial situation.	2.80	1.16	Neutral
I am easily irritated because of my financial situation.	2.87	1.15	Neutral
I have difficulty in concentrating my studies because of my financial situation.	3	1.8	Neutral
I feel nervous because of my financial situation.	3.08	1.24	Neutral
I feel emotionally drained because of my financial situation.	3.17	1.24	Neutral
I feel burned out because of my financial situation.	3.18	1.22	Neutral
I feel frustrated because of my financial situation.	3.17	1.12	Neutral
I feel tired because of my financial situation.	3.08	1.21	Neutral
Grand Mean	3.10		Neutral

The results on financial stress reveal a moderate overall level, with a grand mean of 3.10 interpreted as Neutral. While most items fall within the neutral range, specific emotional indicators, such as anxiety (mean = 3.70), fear (mean = 3.41), and sadness (mean = 3.50), stand out as areas of notable agreement. This suggests that financial stress manifests most strongly in worry-related and affective domains, rather than in hopelessness or loneliness, which remain relatively low. The high variability in concentration difficulties further indicates that academic impacts are uneven, affecting some students more severely than others. These findings align with prior research showing that financial strain often leads to heightened anxiety and emotional distress, which can interfere with academic focus and well-being (Moore et al., 2021; Nasr et al., 2024; Charan et al., 2025). However, the neutral ratings on hopelessness and confidence suggest resilience among students, indicating that while financial stress is present, many still perceive pathways to cope with it. This resilience is consistent with Ansari and Iqbal (2025), who emphasize the buffering effect of social support and financial literacy against the adverse effects of economic stress. Thus, interventions such as counseling, budgeting workshops, and emergency aid programs may help reduce anxiety while sustaining academic performance.

Table 2. *Student Motivation*

Statements	*Mean*	*Stdev*	*Verbal Interpretation*
In a class, I prefer course material that really challenges me so I can learn new things.	3.65	0.80	Agree
If I study in appropriate ways, then I will be able to learn the material in different subjects.	4.21	0.70	Strongly Agree
When I take a test, I think about how poorly I am doing compared with other students.	3.39	1.17	Agree
I believe I will receive an excellent grade.	3.45	0.97	Agree
I'm certain I can understand the most difficult material presented in the readings for my subjects.	3	0.83	Neutral
Getting a good grade is the most satisfying thing for me right now.	4.26	0.79	Strongly Agree
When I take a test, I think about items on other parts of the test I can't answer.	3.88	0.96	Agree
It is my own fault if I don't learn the material in my subjects.	3.73	1.04	Agree
The most important thing for me right now is improving my overall grade point average, so my main concern is getting a good grade.	4.25	0.78	Strongly Agree
If I can, I want to get better grades in the class than most of the other students.	3.72	1.04	Agree
When I take tests, I think of the consequences of failing.	4.02	0.87	Agree
I'm confident I can understand the most complex material presented by the instructor in every subjects.	3	0.82	Neutral
I'm confident I can do an excellent job on the assignments and tests in my subjects.	3.40	0.83	Neutral
If I don't understand the course material, it is because I didn't try hard enough.	3.50	0.99	Agree
I feel my heart beating fast when I take an exam.	3.49	1.16	Agree
I'm certain I can master the skills being taught in my classes.	3.31	0.80	Neutral
I want to do well in my class because it is important to show my ability to my family, friends, employer, and others.	4.23	0.86	Strongly Agree
Grand Mean	3.68		Agree

The student motivation results indicate a generally high level of motivation, with a grand mean of 3.68, interpreted as "agree." The most substantial endorsements are for extrinsic and grade-oriented motives, such as improving GPA (4.25), achieving good grades (4.26), and demonstrating ability to family and employers (4.23). Students also agree with responsibility-oriented statements, reflecting an internalized sense of accountability for their learning. However, self-efficacy for complex material is only neutral, suggesting that while students are motivated, they may lack confidence when facing the most challenging academic tasks.

This motivational profile reflects a performance-driven orientation, consistent with the literature (Lo et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2025), which shows that financial stress often prompts students to focus on extrinsic goals, such as grades and recognition. While this can sustain effort, it also increases vulnerability to test anxiety and burnout. Deng and Liu (2025) indicate that balancing extrinsic motivation with mastery-oriented strategies, such as scaffolded tasks, formative feedback, and opportunities for revision, can enhance self-efficacy and reduce evaluative pressure. Therefore, educators should design learning environments that normalize challenge and emphasize effort over outcome, helping students convert grade-focused motivation into genuine competence gains.

Table 3. *Spearman Correlation Results*

Financial Stress	*Spearman R*	*p-value*	*Probability Level*	*Interpretation*
Student Motivation	0.208	0.029	P<0.05	Weak Positive Significant Relationship

The correlation analysis reveals a weak but statistically significant positive relationship between financial stress and student motivation (Spearman $r = 0.208$, $p = 0.029$). This suggests that as financial stress increases, motivation also tends to rise slightly, though the effect size is small. The finding may appear counterintuitive, but it suggests that financial pressure can act as a motivator, driving students to work harder to secure grades, scholarships, or future opportunities.

This dynamic aligns with studies highlighting the "pressure-to-perform" effect, in which financial challenges can fuel extrinsic motivation and academic striving (Palomares et al., 2024; Russell et al., 2024). However, the weak relationship strength indicates that not all students benefit from this dynamic; for some, stress may undermine rather than enhance motivation—Yang et al. (2022) caution that excessive stress can eventually erode persistence and lead to burnout. Institutions should therefore pair financial support mechanisms, such as scholarships and flexible work-study programs, with motivational supports, including self-efficacy building and mastery framing, to ensure that financial stress does not compromise long-term learning outcomes.

Conclusions

This study examined the relationship between financial stress and student motivation among college students in Bulacan, employing a descriptive correlational design. The findings revealed that financial stress was generally moderate, manifesting most strongly in affective domains such as anxiety and fear. At the same time, student motivation was generally high and primarily driven by extrinsic, grade-oriented factors. The correlation analysis indicated a weak but statistically significant positive association between financial stress and student motivation (Spearman $r = 0.208$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that financial stress may be associated with slightly higher motivation, particularly in contexts where students strive for extrinsic rewards such as grades, scholarships, or recognition. However, it is essential to note that this study does not establish causation; the results merely demonstrate an association between the two variables, and financial stress should not be interpreted as a determining factor in motivation or academic performance.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study did not differentiate between working students and full-time students, whose financial and motivational contexts may vary significantly. Second, the reliance on self-reported survey data introduces the possibility of response bias. Third, the sample comprised 111 students from Bulacan, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other regions or populations. Future research should consider larger, more diverse samples, incorporate longitudinal designs to capture changes over time, and explore mediating variables, such as resilience, financial literacy, and social support, that may influence the relationship between financial stress and motivation.

Based on the findings, institutions may consider implementing targeted interventions to support students in managing financial stress while sustaining healthy motivation. Strategies could include financial literacy workshops, counseling services, and accessible emergency aid programs to reduce anxiety related to financial uncertainty. At the same time, educators should design learning environments that foster mastery-oriented motivation by emphasizing competence, effort, and self-efficacy rather than purely extrinsic outcomes. Combining financial support mechanisms with motivational interventions can help mitigate burnout risks and ensure students remain resilient and engaged in their academic pursuits.

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