

Impact of Academic Workload on Students' Mental Health and Well-being in Higher Education: A Narrative Synthesis of the Literature

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Abstract— College education is one of the most exciting milestones for many students. However, entering a university can also be an overwhelming experience due to the various adjustments students must make. These include adapting to a new environment, forming connections with peers, meeting the expectations of different professors, balancing academic and extracurricular responsibilities during the transition to college life, and managing roles within family and personal relationships. Among these challenges, academic workload emerges as a significant pressure point, impacting students' time management, study strategies, and overall mental health and well-being. This narrative literature review explores peer-reviewed studies that examine the multiple factors influencing academic workload and its effects on student mental health and well-being. It also presents various coping strategies and management techniques college students employ to navigate academic pressures. The review concludes with recommendations for school administrators and educators to reassess current curricula and academic demands, ensuring alignment with higher education standards while prioritizing student mental health. Furthermore, it emphasizes the role of mental health practitioners in developing programs that strengthen students' academic resilience and psychological readiness, as well as providing interventions for those requiring additional support as they adjust to college life.

Keywords— academic workload, mental health, well-being, and college students.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the context of higher education, academic workload covers all academic tasks that a college student must complete and accomplish within each time frame. This involves both structured or instructional activities such as attending online and face-to-face classes or lectures, participating in alternative sessions like seminars while the unstructured or non-instructional activities include doing assignments and course exercises, reviewing for an examination, working with group projects, and participating with co-curricular and extra-curricular activities that contribute to the learning experience and promotes holistic development of students (Bowyer, 2012; D'Eon & Yasinian, 2022; Valero et al., 2011).

There are many factors associated with academic workload. College academic courses that demand numerous requirements can bring challenges to the students' cognitive, physical, social, and psychological well-being (D'Eon & Yasinian, 2022). Another factor associated with workload is the number of hours spent to accomplish and achieve the learning outcome of the course, which can be measured by the credit systems like the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (Impola, 2025; Valero et al., 2011). In connection with this, the perceived

workload of college students is also affected by the set and frequency of the assessments, such as quizzes, long examinations, projects, and reports that the professor gives to the students (Allsopp et al., 2025; Romero-Martin et al., 2014). It is noteworthy that a student must be equipped with proper strategies and techniques for planning, coordination, and time management to overcome academic responsibilities (Julian et al., 2020; Valero et al., 2011).

Mental health refers to a state of overall well-being that permits the individual to withstand the stresses of daily life, become aware of their potential, learn well, be productive in their work and responsibilities, and significantly contribute to their community. This also means that the individual has a positive psychological functioning and has no mental health disorder or diagnosis (Singh & Kumar, 2024). Furthermore, well-being is a more comprehensive concept that encompasses the physical, mental, emotional, and social aspects of health. It comprises positive psychological emotions or feelings such as happiness, fulfillment, and satisfaction, and a sense of hope and purpose in life (Chauhan & Mohan, 2024). Well-being pertains not only in the absence of mental illness, but it emphasizes the importance of flourishing in an individual's life, which includes having positive emotions, maintaining healthy relationships, finding meaning in what they do, being engaged, and accomplishing goals (Vetrivel & Mohanasundaram, 2024).

Maintaining good mental health and well-being is vital for academic success. Students with positive mental health can cope with stress, adjust to daily challenges more effectively, and maximize their cognitive potential (Ashipala & Albanus, 2024; Nogueira & Sequeira, 2024).

In this regard, this study aims to explore the multiple factors influencing academic workload and its impact on college students' mental health and well-being. It also presents various coping strategies and management techniques that college students employ to get through academic pressures and achieve academic success. Specifically, it aims to answer this research question: "What is the impact of academic workload on student mental health and well-being in higher education?"

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a narrative review to examine the existing literature on college academic workload and its impact on mental health and well-being. This method provides a comprehensive review of the topic through a summary and synthesis of existing research without the constraints of systematic protocols (Rammal, 2023; Skelly et al., 2019).

A literature search was conducted using the following search terms ("academic workload" OR "study load" OR "course load" OR "academic pressure" OR "academic stress") AND ("mental health" OR "well-being" OR "psychological health" OR "emotional health") AND ("college students" OR "university students" OR "higher education" OR "undergraduates") AND ("stress" OR "anxiety" OR "depression" OR "burnout") AND ("coping strategies" OR "support systems" OR "interventions" OR "resources"). These articles were analyzed and synthesized to present the findings related to students' academic workload and its impact on their mental health and well-being in higher education.

For the inclusion criteria, this study focuses on articles related to academic workload, mental health, and well-being in higher education that have been peer-reviewed and published within the last 15 years (2010-2025) to ensure the relevance and appropriateness of the findings. For the exclusion criteria, all articles that are not involved in the topics mentioned above were excluded, as well as those that are not peer-reviewed and opinion articles. More so, publications not written in English and from 2009 and below were also included in the study.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The impact of academic workload on the students' mental health and well-being has been well-documented in different literature. Students who were unable to cope with the demands of coursework often experience anxiety and depression, which is also a major predictor of academic performance, leading to low motivation and a loss of interest in learning (Otieno, 2025). More so, academic pressure that includes course requirements, financial challenges, social adjustment, and living away from home are the contributory factors affecting the college students' subjective well-being and psychological stability (Abdullah et al., 2022; Fernandez & Anu, 2022; Kazi & Sandbulte, 2023; Vetrivel & Mohanasundaram, 2024). Studies also show that stress related to academic workload (Lubin et al., 2024), overwhelming learning settings (Garcés et al., 2023), and high academic pressure (Nogueira & Sequeira, 2024) can cause mental health deterioration and psychological distress.

In the Philippines, a study of undergraduate students during the abrupt transition due to the pandemic found strong relationships between academic workload during online classes and mental fatigue. This study concluded that academic workload significantly contributes to escalating the levels of mental fatigue among college students (Sy et al., 2021). In China, the phenomenon called academic involution was identified as the key factor in heightened mental exhaustion among college students. Academic involution was marked by strong competition among peers in academic performance and uncontrollable changes in the higher education setting (Ni et al., 2024). Another study was conducted among engineering students, wherein results revealed that they experienced a high level of stress due to the volume and intensity of the workload they needed to complete, which led to strong negative emotions that affect their performance. The findings indicated that academic stress is profoundly influenced by workload, study skills, and access to resources. These factors have a direct detrimental effect on students' mental health and educational achievement (Korsten et al., 2021).

Furthermore, engaging in multiple academic courses or subjects and examinations also contributed to the pressure that undergraduate students experience, together with the difficulty in dividing time efficiently between studying and resting, which significantly predicts academic burnout (Araoz et al., 2025). Meeting submission deadlines and time limitations escalates emotional strain, mental load, and academic burnout among college students (Beri & Kaur, 2024). These psychological challenges due to high academic load and pressure can lead to chronic stress. This condition may worsen and can have a long-term effect on students' mental health and well-being, such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideations (Di Mario et al., 2024; Pan & Ma, 2025). Evidence from the literature reveals that college students' mental health is greatly affected by the persistent educational pressure and poor coping strategies (Ban et al., 2022; Kaur et al., 2024). Likewise, burnout from academic workload is associated with poor scholastic outcomes and campus involvement (Liébana-Presa et al., 2018).

All this literature points out that the inability to manage excessive coursework greatly impacts students' mental health and well-being. However, it is also very important to explore the different strategies and techniques that college students implement to overcome the barriers to achieving academic success. A study conducted in a large public university in the United States revealed that college students used distraction, deep breathing, relaxation techniques, and social activities to help them manage academic stress effectively and improve well-being (Stallman et al., 2022). However, on the contrary, this study also discovered that aside from positive coping strategies, there are also unhealthy coping strategies that students developed, such as social withdrawal and poor eating habits. Another common mechanism for college students dealing with stress is exercise. Committing to regular physical activities and incorporating a fitness routine in their academic life has helped them boost their mental health and promote positive emotions (Campbell et al., 2025). In addition, the study also revealed that students who established effective time management and planned their academic tasks were able to manage their workload successfully.

It is also noteworthy that students also used psychological coping, such as positive reappraisal or reframing their outlook about the difficulties they are experiencing by opting to shift their perspective into a more positive mindset. These allow them to focus on the solution in problem solving, which facilitates reducing perceived stress and enhances academic performance (Crego et al., 2016). More so, seeking help and support from significant people in their lives, such as their family, friends, and classmates, is another tool that college students employ to regulate stress related to academics (Ban et al., 2022).

Ultimately, while college students are vulnerable to experiencing mental health challenges and poor well-being due to the high academic expectations, rigorous academic demands, and intense academic pressure brought by academic workload, it is crucial that students are equipped with healthy coping strategies for them to achieve academic goals.

IV. CONCLUSION

The intensity and volume of academic workload act as a vital determinant and a crucial factor affecting the mental health and well-being of college students. These, if not immediately addressed, may lead to serious psychological problems such as mental fatigue, academic burnout, anxiety, depression, chronic stress, and even suicidal ideation, leading to poor academic performance and unsatisfactory college life. This academic issue and student concern need a proactive and preventive intervention to help mitigate the challenges and improve the quality of academic life for college students.

For the academic institutions to review and assess students' coursework across colleges and year levels, and to make sure that the academic workload is realistic and achievable within a time frame, considering students' mental health and well-being. Faculty should ensure the quality of the instructional materials and methods used inside and outside the classroom, which enhances student engagement and promotes academic achievement. Establishment of mental health interventions that support and address students' unique needs and concerns. Providing services and programs that aid in developing healthy coping strategies and boost resilience among students can help them achieve not only academic success but also positive mental health and well-being.

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