



## Indigenous Peoples in Higher Education: An Assessment of the Psychological Well-being of Students

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### Abstract

Inclusive education is a transformative approach, ensuring equitable access to quality education for all students, irrespective of their abilities, backgrounds, or differences. This study focuses on assessing the psychological well-being of IP students in higher education. To achieve this, a descriptive non-experimental research approach was employed, with data collected from currently enrolled IP students in a public higher education institution in the Philippines using a census sampling technique. The findings underscore a preference among IP students for the education program, with a majority of female students in the institution. The overall status of the psychological well-being of IP students is notably positive, reflecting a high degree of well-being. While the choice of academic program does not significantly affect their well-being, (sex) gender emerges as a key factor influencing the psychological well-being of IP students. These results can be leveraged to enhance the higher education experience for IP students by taking into account the critical aspect of psychological well-being.

### Keywords

Inclusive education, Indigenous peoples, Higher education, Psychological well-being

### INTRODUCTION

The "Education for All" initiative is a worldwide effort with the goal of providing quality education to every person, irrespective of their socioeconomic status, gender, age, or any other determining factors (Hopkins, 2015). However, numerous investigations have unveiled that indigenous peoples (IP) encounter significant challenges in their pursuit of education, particularly in higher education. Despite their recognition of the importance of education, IPs have endured unfavorable experiences due to the scarcity of educational resources (Regaspi, 2023). Additionally, indigenous students have experienced discrimination and social stigma within the educational system. This may manifest as unfair or disrespectful treatment from both educators and peers, as well as the imposition of distinct standards based on their indigenous identity (UNICEF, 2019).

Another issue arises from the fact that many subjects taught in educational institutions rely on English terms, for which there may be no equivalent in the indigenous languages. This linguistic barrier poses a significant challenge for indigenous peoples as they strive to keep pace with their coursework (Eduardo & Gabriel, 2021). As a result of these challenges, the psychological well-being of indigenous students has been detrimentally impacted, consequently affecting their interest and motivation to pursue academic excellence.

This paper is fundamentally anchored in the Cultural Continuity Theory by Cajete (2016). This theory underscores the significance of culturally appropriate education for indigenous communities. It contends that education should honor and incorporate the cultures, languages, and customs of indigenous peoples into the educational framework. This approach increases the likelihood of indigenous students actively participating in and thriving within the educational

system. Cultural continuity theory emphasizes that preserving a robust link to their cultural heritage is crucial for the overall well-being of indigenous students.

This is also supported by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (2015), particularly the Goal 4 – Quality Education and Goal 10 – Reduced Inequalities. Accordingly, equality and inclusivity in education. This highlights the significance of delivering education that is available to everyone, without regard to variables such as gender, economic status, disabilities, ethnicity, or geographical location. It advocates for the eradication of inequalities and the establishment of an education system that is both inclusive and fair.

In the Philippine context, one of the primary policies in this regard is the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) of 1997, also known as Republic Act No. 8371. While IPRA's main focus is on acknowledging and safeguarding the rights of indigenous peoples concerning their ancestral lands, it also carries implications for the field of education. IPRA recognizes the cultural integrity of indigenous peoples, which includes their social, economic, and cultural well-being. This recognition extends to their unique knowledge systems, practices, and traditions, and is a basis for the promotion of culturally sensitive and relevant education.

Drawing from the existing knowledge base on education, numerous studies have been conducted to evaluate the engagement of IP students in the educational system. However, researchers have observed that the prevailing literature predominantly concentrates on examining the factors and determinants contributing to the challenges faced by IP students in their educational pursuits. A noticeable gap exists in the examination of the psychological well-being of IP students in higher education. Consequently, researchers have identified the need to address this gap in the literature, exploring these essential concepts.

This paper aims to assess the psychological well-being of IP students, taking into account academic challenges, interpersonal issues, depression, career concerns, suicidal tendencies, substance abuse, self-esteem challenges, and family problems. Also, will also examine if there is a significant difference on the level of psychological well-being of IP students when grouped according program and sex.

The insights derived from this paper will be of value not only to the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) and higher education institutions but also to indigenous (IP) students. These findings will serve as a cornerstone for improving the services provided by these institutions to better meet the needs of IP students. Furthermore, the research will offer IP students valuable insights into the factors affecting their psychological well-being, aiding them in coping with the challenges they face during their higher education pursuits.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study utilized the quantitative non-experimental research design. This design seeks to provide a detailed account or profile of the subject under investigation by describing and summarizing its characteristics or phenomena, without manipulating variables or establishing causal relationships. Researchers in this design collect numerical data for this purpose (Miller & Salkind, 2002). In this study, this design outlines how the researchers handle the variables, including the demographic profile of the respondents and their psychological well-being status.

The participants in this study consisted of indigenous (IP) students from Kapalong College of Agriculture, Sciences, and Technology (KCAST). KCAST is a higher education institution managed by the Local Government Unit of Kapalong, Davao del Norte, Philippines. IP students are individuals who are members of, or hail from, indigenous communities. These students were formally enrolled and accepted into various programs at the institution. The researchers employed a census technique, which involves a complete enumeration, to establish the sample size for this paper (Wright, 1998).

Participation in this research was entirely voluntary, and they had the freedom to decline without any loss of privileges or advantages. They were also granted the autonomy to withdraw their consent at any stage without incurring any repercussions. Their involvement in this scientific study did not impact their legal rights and procedures in any manner.

To assess the psychological well-being of IP students, the standardize instrument form Psychological Assessment Resources, Inc. (1991). This questionnaire is commonly utilized by experts and practitioners in the field of psychology. The collection of data was administered by Registered Guidance Counselor with the assistance of the Registered Psychometricians of the institution.

To analyze the collected data for this study, the following methods were employed: Frequency and percentage were used to describe the demographic profile of the respondents. Mean and standard deviation were applied to characterize the psychological well-being status of IP students. ANOVA and T-test were utilized to assess whether there exists a significant difference in the psychological well-being status of IP students when categorized by program and sex.

## **RESULTS**

Table 1 presents a breakdown of student profiles based on their programs. The table shows that the institution has a total of 200 officially admitted IP students. The Education program boasts the largest enrollment, with 52 students, accounting for 26% of the total. Following closely, the Office Administration and Business Administration departments each have 36 IP students, making up 18% of the total. The Public Administration department houses 28 IP students, representing 14%. The Criminology department has 27 IP students, constituting 13.5% of the total, while the Agriculture department has the smallest enrollment, with 21 IP students, or 10.5%.

**Table 1** Profile of IP Students in Terms of Program

Respondents	Frequency	Percentage
Education	52	26%
Criminology	27	13.5%
Public Administration	28	14%
Office Administration	36	18%
Business Administration	36	18%
Agriculture	21	10.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 2 provides an overview of the gender distribution among IP students. The data reveals that out of the total number of IP students officially admitted to the institution, 132 are female, constituting 66% of the total. In contrast, there are 68 male IP students, accounting for 34%.

**Table 2** Profile of IP Students in Terms of Sex

Respondents	Frequency	Percentage
Male	68	34%
Female	132	66%
<b>Total</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 3 illustrates the psychological well-being status of IP students. In general, the psychological well-being of IP students is significantly positive, as indicated by the *high* status. Furthermore, it is worth noting that most of the indicators, particularly those associated with negative aspects, exhibit low scores, with *substance abuse* being *exceptionally low*.

Additionally, even though all indicators are rated at *low* levels, the indicator for *anxiety* registers the highest score. This suggests that *anxiety* is a prevalent experience among IP students in their educational endeavors within the school. This is followed by the *suicidal ideation* which also remains at a *low* level.

**Table 3** Status of Psychological Well-Being of IP Students

Indicators	Mean	SD	Description
Academic Problems	2.236	.451	Low
Anxiety	2.320	.491	Low
Interpersonal Problems	2.245	.468	Low
Depression	2.292	.436	Low
Career Problems	2.271	.533	Low
Suicidal Ideation	1.802	.553	Low
Substance Abuse	1.383	.475	Very Low
Self-esteem Problems	2.339	.418	Low
Family Problems	2.087	.470	Low
<b>Psychological Well-Being</b>	<b>2.108</b>	<b>.364</b>	<b>High</b>
<b>Legend for the Overall Score:</b>		<b>Legend for Indicators:</b>	
1.00 – 1.75 Very High	1.76 – 2.50 High	1.00 – 1.75 Very Low	1.76 – 2.50 Low
2.51 – 3.25 Low	3.26 – 4.00 Very Low	2.51 – 3.25 High	3.26 – 4.00 Very High

Table 4 offers a summary of the results, assessing whether the program of the IP students has a significant impact on the status of their psychological well-being. According to the findings, it yields an F value of 0.293 and a p-value of 0.917. These results lead to the acceptance of the null hypothesis in the study, indicating that the enrolled program of IP students does not affect their psychological well-being.

**Table 4** Status of Psychological Well-Being When Grouped According to Program

Variable	Groups	Mean	f value	p value	Decision
Psychological Well-Being	Education	2.115	0.293	0.917	Accept the Null Hypothesis
	Criminology	2.065			
	Public Administration	2.131			
	Office Administration	2.156			
	Business Administration	2.075			
	Agriculture	2.089			
<b>Legend of the Mean Score:</b>					
1.00 – 1.75 Very High	1.76 – 2.50 High				
2.51 – 3.25 Low	3.26 – 4.00 Very Low				

Table 5 revealed that summary of the analysis if the sex impacts the psychological well-being of IP students. Based on the findings, F value got 3.557 and a p value of 0.035. These results suggest the rejection of the null hypothesis implying that the sex of IP students affects the status of their psychological well-being.

**Table 5** Status of Psychological Well-Being When Grouped According to Sex

Variable	Groups	Mean	f value	p value	Decision
Psychological Well-Being	Male	2.415	3.557	0.035	Reject the Null Hypothesis
	Female	2.110			
<b>Legend of the Mean Score:</b>					
1.00 – 1.75 Very High		1.76 – 2.50 High			
2.51 – 3.25 Low		3.26 – 4.00 Very Low			

Furthermore, upon closer examination, it's evident that males obtained an overall mean score of 2.415, whereas females achieved an overall mean score of 2.110. This signifies that, statistically speaking, female IP students tend to experience higher levels of psychological well-being compared to their male counterparts.

## DISCUSSION

The findings, specifically the descriptive analysis of the respondents' profiles, shed light on the fact that 26% of IP students are currently pursuing the Education program. This suggests a significant inclination among IP students towards a career in teaching. In fact, a substantial number of young students in Maasim, Sarangani, Philippines, express a strong desire to become teachers in the future, driven by their aspirations to contribute to their community (as documented by HOPE in 2017).

Furthermore, it's worth noting that education ranks among the top ten most preferred college programs in the Philippines. According to data from 2017, a total of 740,713 Filipinos were enrolled in education programs, underscoring the widespread interest in pursuing careers in the field of education across the country.

The information concerning the Indigenous Peoples (IP) students enrolled in the institution has brought to light an interesting trend. Out of the total IP student population, which amounts to 200, it was revealed that a substantial portion, specifically 132 students, are female. This figure accounts for a significant 66% of the IP student body.

This demographic insight suggests a positive shift in the attitudes of IP women towards education. It implies that an increasing number of IP women are recognizing and appreciating the significance of education in their lives. This shift can be seen as a positive development, highlighting the empowerment of IP women through education.

In this context, the viewpoint expressed by Weaver in 2015 gains relevance. According to Weaver, it is crucial for IP women to fully embrace the educational opportunities available to them. However, this should not come at the cost of sacrificing their indigenous culture. The emphasis here is on striking a balance between acquiring a modern education and preserving and celebrating their unique cultural heritage. This approach enables IP women to navigate the contemporary educational system while retaining their cultural identity and heritage, fostering a harmonious coexistence of the two aspects of their lives.

### Status of the Psychological Well-being of IP Students

Taken as a whole, the assessment of the psychological well-being of IP students reflects a highly favorable outlook. This means that, on the whole, IP students exhibit a strong and positive state of psychological well-being.

The high level in their psychological well-being status suggests that, as a group, these students are experiencing emotional and mental health in a positive and resilient manner. They likely demonstrate a healthy balance of emotional stability, self-esteem, and general well-being. This is an encouraging sign, as it implies that IP students are coping well with the various challenges and stressors they may encounter in their academic and personal lives.

This overall positive psychological well-being status is an essential aspect of their overall development and success in the educational environment, as it contributes to their ability to engage effectively in their studies and handle the demands of higher education. It signifies a sense of inner strength and adaptability, which can be a valuable asset for their educational journeys and beyond.

This discovery challenges the assertions made by UNESCO in 2018, which suggest that despite the existence of numerous international instruments proclaiming universal rights to education, indigenous peoples still do not fully realize these rights. According to UNESCO, there remains a critical education gap between indigenous peoples and the general population worldwide. However, the findings of this study contradict this perspective, as they reveal that IP students enjoy a desirable level of psychological well-being. This suggests that there may be positive aspects to the educational experiences of indigenous students that warrant further exploration and recognition.

### Profile on the Status of Psychological Well-being of IP Students

The results support the acceptance of the null hypothesis in the study, suggesting that the specific program in which IP students are enrolled does not impact their psychological well-being. The historical trauma experienced by Indigenous communities can affect the psychological well-being of IP students. Indigenous students often grapple with the need to balance their cultural identity with academic pursuits. Brayboy et al. (2015) argue that understanding and acknowledging this unique challenge is crucial for providing appropriate support for Indigenous students in college. This suggests that the enrolled college program alone may not be the sole determinant of their psychological well-being.

Moreover, research by Bexley (2008) highlights the importance of a supportive campus environment for the psychological well-being of IP students. Factors such as access to culturally relevant support systems, mentorship, and a

sense of community on campus can positively influence their mental health. This implies that the college program's impact on psychological well-being is intertwined with the broader institutional context.

On the other hand, the sex (male and female) of IP students is a significant factor that influences the state of their psychological well-being. This implies that there are notable variations in the psychological well-being of IP students depending on their gender.

Elaborating further, it suggests that male and female IP students may experience different levels of psychological well-being. These variations could be influenced by a range of factors, including societal expectations, cultural influences, and individual experiences. Understanding the impact of gender on psychological well-being among IP students is essential for tailoring support and interventions to address the unique needs and challenges faced by different gender groups within the indigenous community. This knowledge can contribute to the development of more effective and inclusive approaches to promoting the well-being of IP students in educational settings.

This supports that gender can impact the educational experiences of IP students. For example, research by Pio (2020) discusses how gender dynamics within indigenous communities can influence access to education and the kinds of educational opportunities that are available to male and female students. This can, in turn, affect their overall well-being. Also, indigenous cultures often have distinct gender roles and expectations. The work of Kleinfeld and Andrews (2006) explores how these roles can influence the psychological well-being of IP students, as they navigate the intersection of traditional cultural expectations and modern educational aspirations.

### **Recommendations**

The presence of anxiety among IP students highlights the importance of higher education institutions taking proactive measures to address this concern, particularly among male IP students. This underscores the need for these institutions to either initiate or sustain interventions aimed at alleviating anxiety within their student body.

In addition to institutional efforts, it may be beneficial for higher education institutions to consider the establishment of student organizations or support groups. These groups can play a pivotal role in involving all students, both indigenous and non-indigenous, in addressing anxiety-related issues within the learning environment. This collaborative approach can foster a supportive and inclusive atmosphere, encouraging the sharing of experiences and strategies to manage anxiety effectively.

Future researchers have a valuable opportunity to delve deeper into the state of psychological well-being among IP students. This exploration can involve a more comprehensive and rigorous investigation, considering a range of factors and employing various research methods.

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