

COUNSELING SERVICES, ACADEMIC STRESS, AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF UNDERGRADUATES IN STATE-OWNED UNIVERSITIES IN RIVERS STATE

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ABSTRACT

This study examined counseling services, academic stress and academic performance among undergraduates in state-owned universities in Rivers State. A correlational survey design was adopted. The analytical sample comprised 384 undergraduates drawn from Rivers State University and Ignatius Ajuru University of Education. Counseling services were assessed in terms of students' access to and use of academic, personal-social and stress-management support; academic stress was measured with a validated Nigerian undergraduate stress framework; and academic performance was represented by students' most recent cumulative grade point average. Pearson correlation and multiple regression were used for analysis. Counseling services were positively related to academic performance ($r = .369, p < .001$), whereas academic stress was negatively related to academic performance ($r = -.437, p < .001$). In the joint model, counseling services made a significant positive contribution ($B = .263, p < .001$) and academic stress made a significant negative contribution ($B = -.311, p < .001$). Together, the two predictors explained 25.0% of the variance in academic performance, $R^2 = .250, F(2, 381) = 63.45, p < .001$. The study concludes that academic performance is associated with students' counseling-support environment and with the level of academic stress they experience. It recommended the provision of accessible, visible and academically integrated university counseling services alongside systematic stress-management support.

Keywords: counseling services; academic stress; academic performance; undergraduates; state-owned universities; Rivers State

INTRODUCTION

University education exposes students to substantial academic demands. Lectures, continuous assessment, examinations, project work, deadlines, financial pressure and uncertainty about future employment can combine to make the undergraduate experience stressful. Stress is not uniformly harmful: manageable challenge can mobilise effort, but persistent or poorly regulated academic stress can interfere with concentration, memory, motivation, sleep and engagement. Reviews of student stress show that elevated stress is associated with poorer educational and health outcomes, especially when students have insufficient coping resources (Pascoe et al., 2020).

Academic performance is one of the most visible outcomes of undergraduate education. It reflects how effectively students meet the cognitive and assessment demands of their programmes and is commonly represented by grade point average or cumulative grade point average. Performance is influenced by many factors, so no single psychological or institutional variable should be treated as a complete explanation. Nevertheless, stress is consistently relevant because excessive demands can consume cognitive and emotional resources that would otherwise support learning, while effective coping can preserve functioning.

Nigerian evidence supports the importance of this relationship. Oyewobi et al. (2020) examined stress and coping among undergraduates and reported significant relationships between stress-related constructs and performance. Owoyele (2009) found that stress-management skills were positively associated with academic achievement among undergraduates in two Nigerian universities. More recently, Anozie et al. (2024) reported a negative association between perceived academic stress and academic performance among Nigerian undergraduates. These findings

suggest that academic stress is not merely a welfare issue; it has direct relevance to educational outcomes.

Counseling services constitute one institutional mechanism through which universities can help students manage academic, personal and social challenges. Effective counseling services may provide orientation, academic counseling, study-skills support, crisis intervention, referral, stress-management training and individual or group counseling. Such services do not guarantee high grades, but they can improve students' access to coping resources, clarify problems and support help-seeking before difficulties become more severe. Okunaiya and Omovre (2021) found high awareness but relatively low utilisation of guidance and counseling services among Nigerian university students, while respondents commonly believed that counseling could support mental health and academic performance.

The context of state-owned universities in Rivers State is particularly suitable for examining these constructs because the state has two established public universities with large undergraduate populations: Rivers State University and Ignatius Ajuru University of Education. Their official institutional histories identify them as state-owned universities in Rivers State. The concern is not that all undergraduates in these institutions experience harmful stress or that counseling services alone determine academic results. Rather, the unresolved question is whether differences in students' counseling-service experience and academic stress are systematically associated with differences in academic performance.

Consequently, this study examined counseling services and academic stress as predictors of academic performance among undergraduates in state-owned universities in Rivers State. It assessed the separate relationships of both predictors with academic performance and their joint contribution to differences in students' cumulative grade point average.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to find out the relationship between Counseling Services, Academic Stress, and Academic Performance of Undergraduates in State-owned Universities in Rivers State. Specifically, the study sought to do the following:

1. Determine the relationship between counseling services and academic performance among undergraduates in state-owned universities in Rivers State;
2. Determine the relationship between academic stress and academic performance among undergraduates in state-owned universities in Rivers State; and
3. Determine the joint contribution of counseling services and academic stress to academic performance among undergraduates in state-owned universities in Rivers State.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the relationship between counseling services and academic performance among undergraduates in state-owned universities in Rivers State?
2. What is the relationship between academic stress and academic performance among undergraduates in state-owned universities in Rivers State?
3. What is the joint contribution of counseling services and academic stress to academic performance among undergraduates in state-owned universities in Rivers State?

Research Hypotheses

1. H01: Counseling services have no significant relationship with academic performance among undergraduates in state-owned universities in Rivers State.
2. H02: Academic stress has no significant relationship with academic performance among undergraduates in state-owned universities in Rivers State.
3. H03: Counseling services and academic stress do not jointly make a significant contribution to academic performance among undergraduates in state-owned universities in Rivers State.

Literature Review

Counseling Services

Counseling services in universities refer to organised professional activities designed to help students understand and manage academic, personal, social, career and psychological concerns. Relevant services can include orientation, individual counseling, group counseling, academic counseling, referral, crisis support, study-skills assistance and stress-management programmes. Their educational importance lies in helping students mobilise resources before difficulties undermine participation or persistence.

Availability and utilisation are distinct. A university may formally have a counseling centre while students remain unaware of it, perceive it as inaccessible, fear stigma or see it as disconnected from academic life. Okunaiya and Omovre (2021) found high awareness but low utilisation of guidance and counseling services in a Nigerian university sample. The same study reported that many students considered academic work strenuous and believed counseling could help improve academic performance. This distinction suggests that research should focus not only on the existence of services but on students' practical access to and use of them.

Counseling may influence academic performance indirectly through several mechanisms: improved coping, better time management, reduced test anxiety, problem clarification, referral for more specialised help and improved study behaviour. Evidence from intervention research on university test anxiety shows that psychological and behavioural interventions can reduce anxiety and improve academic performance, although effects vary and the evidence base has methodological limitations (Huntley et al., 2019). Counseling services are therefore best understood as a support resource rather than a direct substitute for teaching, study effort or academic ability.

Academic Stress

Academic stress refers to the psychological strain students experience when they perceive academic demands as taxing or exceeding their available resources. Typical stressors include heavy workload, examinations, deadlines, competition, difficult courses, uncertainty about grades and conflict between academic responsibilities and other demands. The transactional perspective of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) emphasises that stress depends not only on the demand itself but on appraisal and coping resources.

In Nigeria, Ogundokun and Ogunsola (2017) developed and validated an academic stress scale among undergraduates, demonstrating that the construct can be measured across several academic stressor domains. Their work is important for the present study because it provides locally grounded measurement evidence rather than assuming that instruments developed elsewhere automatically capture the same stress structure.

Academic stress can impair performance when it disrupts attention, working memory, sleep, motivation or persistence. Pascoe et al. (2020) reviewed evidence across secondary and higher education and concluded that stress has important implications for academic outcomes and student well-being. Nigerian studies also show that the relationship is complex rather than mechanically negative. Oyewobi et al. (2020), for example, reported that some stress may coexist with effective performance where coping remains adequate, while Anozie et al. (2024) found a negative association between perceived academic stress and academic performance. The present study therefore tests the relationship empirically rather than presuming its magnitude.

Academic Performance

Academic performance represents the degree to which students meet the assessed learning requirements of their programmes. In university research it is commonly operationalised through GPA or CGPA because these indicators aggregate performance across courses and assessment periods. CGPA does not capture every dimension of learning, creativity or professional competence, but it provides a standardised outcome that can be linked to student-support and stress variables.

In this study, performance is treated as the dependent variable and is not redefined as satisfaction, engagement or perceived achievement.

Theoretical Review

The study is anchored in the transactional model of stress and coping developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). The model proposes that stress results from the relationship between environmental demands and the individual's appraisal of available coping resources. Academic workload, examinations and deadlines can be appraised as threatening when students believe their coping resources are insufficient. Counseling services can strengthen those resources by providing problem-solving assistance, emotional support, study-skills guidance, stress-management strategies and referral. The model therefore explains why academic stress may be negatively associated with performance while counseling services may show a positive association. Importantly, the present study does not require counseling services to be a statistical moderator; both variables can have independent associations with performance within the same stress-and-coping logic.

Conceptual Framework

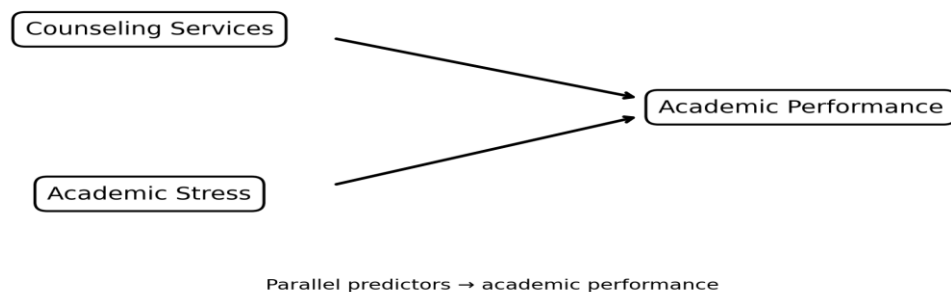


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study.

Figure 1 presents counseling services and academic stress as parallel predictors of academic performance. The first directional path represents the expected association between counseling services and academic performance, while the second represents the expected association between academic stress and academic performance. The regression model evaluates the unique and joint contributions of both predictors.

Empirical Review and Gap

Okunaiya and Omovre (2021) examined counseling-service accessibility and mental-health issues among Nigerian university students. They reported high awareness but low utilisation of guidance and counseling services, while a substantial proportion of respondents viewed academic work as strenuous. The study supports the relevance of counseling and academic stress in Nigerian higher education but did not estimate their joint contribution to measured academic performance in Rivers State.

Owoyele (2009) found a positive relationship between stress-management skills and academic achievement among undergraduates in two Nigerian universities. Oyewobi et al. (2020) also examined academic stress, non-academic stress, coping and performance among Nigerian undergraduates, showing that coping processes matter in understanding the stress–performance relationship. Anozie et al. (2024) found that perceived academic stress was negatively related to academic performance in a large Nigerian undergraduate sample. Together, these studies support the plausibility of the proposed relationships but leave a contextual gap concerning state-owned

universities in Rivers State and a model that simultaneously includes counseling services and academic stress.

The present study addresses the contextual gap by examining counseling services and academic stress in the same model among undergraduates in state-owned universities in Rivers State. Because the design is correlational, the analysis estimates the direction and strength of association and the proportion of performance variance explained jointly by the two predictors rather than claiming causal effects.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A correlational survey design was adopted. The design was appropriate because the study examined naturally occurring differences in counseling-service experience, academic stress and academic performance without manipulating the predictor variables.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A sample of 384 undergraduates was used, consistent with a large-population survey benchmark at approximately 95% confidence and 5% precision. Multistage sampling was specified: the two universities formed the institutional strata; faculties and departments were selected within each university; and students were selected across levels of study to reduce concentration in a single discipline or year. The final analytical sample retained 384 complete cases..

Data Analysis

Pearson product-moment correlation was used to test the bivariate relationships between counseling services and academic performance and between academic stress and academic performance. Multiple linear regression was then used to determine the joint and unique contributions of counseling services and academic stress to academic performance. The decision criterion was $\alpha = .05$. Because the design is correlational, regression coefficients are interpreted as predictive associations rather than causal effects.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Counseling services	3.10	0.54	1.000		
2. Academic stress	3.19	0.62	-.317	1.000	
3. Academic performance (CGPA)	2.98	0.58	.369	-.437	1.000

Counseling services showed a positive relationship with academic performance, $r = .369$, $p < .001$. Students reporting stronger access to and use of counseling services tended to have higher CGPA. Academic stress showed a negative relationship with academic performance, $r = -.437$, $p < .001$, indicating that higher stress was associated with lower CGPA. Counseling services and academic stress were also moderately negatively related ($r = -.317$), but this relationship was not itself a title-level research objective.

Multiple Regression

Predictor	B	SE B	t	p	Direction
Constant	3.177	0.173	18.35	$< .001$	—
Counseling services	0.263	0.048	5.52	$< .001$	Positive

Academic stress	-0.311	0.041	-7.60	< .001	Negative
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The joint regression model was statistically significant, $F(2, 381) = 63.45$, $p < .001$, with $R^2 = .250$. Counseling services and academic stress therefore explained 25.0% of the variance in academic performance in the analytical sample. Holding academic stress constant, stronger counseling-service scores were associated with higher academic performance ($B = .263$, $p < .001$). Holding counseling services constant, higher academic stress was associated with lower academic performance ($B = -.311$, $p < .001$). H01 and H02 were rejected. H03 was also rejected because the two predictors jointly made a statistically significant contribution to academic performance.

DISCUSSION

The study found that counseling services were positively associated with academic performance among undergraduates in the state-owned universities studied. The result supports the view that counseling can function as an academic support resource rather than merely a crisis service. Students who can access counseling for study difficulties, stress management, decision making and personal problems may be better able to preserve the attention and self-regulation required for academic work.

This interpretation is consistent with Okunaiya and Omovre (2021), who reported that Nigerian university students generally perceived guidance and counseling as potentially beneficial for mental health and academic performance, despite relatively low utilisation. It is also consistent with the broader intervention literature reviewed by Huntley et al. (2019), which shows that psychological and behavioural interventions can improve academic outcomes in students experiencing test anxiety. The implication is not that counseling directly creates grades, but that it can strengthen coping and reduce barriers to effective learning.

Academic stress was negatively related to academic performance, and it remained a significant predictor after counseling services were entered in the same model. This finding aligns with Anozie et al. (2024), who reported a negative association between perceived academic stress and performance among Nigerian undergraduates, and with the broader review by Pascoe et al. (2020). It also complements Nigerian evidence that stress management skills are positively related to achievement (Owoyele, 2009).

The joint model is particularly important for interpreting the title. Academic performance was not explained by stress alone and was not explained by counseling services alone. The two variables together accounted for one quarter of the variance in performance, leaving substantial variance to other influences such as prior preparation, motivation, teaching quality, finances, health, attendance and study habits. This is a more defensible conclusion than suggesting that counseling services automatically neutralise stress or that stress determines grades.

From the transactional stress-and-coping perspective, the result is coherent. Academic demands are more likely to impair functioning when students appraise them as exceeding available resources. Counseling can expand coping resources through problem solving, emotional support, study planning and referral. The significant positive counseling coefficient and significant negative stress coefficient therefore represent distinct but theoretically compatible pathways to academic performance.

CONCLUSION

The study examined counseling services, academic stress and academic performance among undergraduates in state-owned universities in Rivers State. Counseling services were positively associated with academic performance, academic stress was negatively associated with performance, and the two variables jointly explained a meaningful proportion of performance differences. The evidence supports stronger integration of counseling into the academic support system of state-owned universities while also highlighting the need for systematic stress-management interventions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made.

1. State-owned universities in Rivers State should make counseling services more visible, accessible and integrated with academic support rather than positioning them only as crisis-response units.
2. Accessible, visible and academically integrated university counseling services alongside systematic stress-management support should be provided.
3. Counseling centres should provide regular stress-management, study-skills, time-management and examination-preparation programmes for undergraduates.
4. Faculties and departments should establish clear referral pathways so that students experiencing persistent academic stress can access professional support early.
5. University counseling units should monitor not only awareness of services but actual utilisation, perceived accessibility and barriers such as stigma or uncertainty about confidentiality.
6. Future studies should use longitudinal designs and verified academic records to test whether changes in counseling utilisation and academic stress precede changes in academic performance.

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