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Article

Beyond Counseling: Lived Experiences of Northeastern College Students on Student Engagement through Guidance Office Services in Santiago City: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Student engagement is a critical dimension of higher education, influencing academic persistence, psychological well-being, institutional belonging, and students' overall educational experiences. While guidance offices have traditionally been associated with counseling and psychological intervention, their broader contributions to student engagement remain insufficiently explored, particularly within the context of local higher education institutions in the Philippines. This study seeks to explore the lived experiences of students at Northeastern College in Santiago City, Isabela, regarding their engagement with guidance office services. Anchored in a phenomenological research design, the inquiry will employ purposive sampling to identify students with firsthand experiences of accessing institutional guidance services. Data will be generated through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analyzed using a phenomenological approach to identify significant statements, meaning units, and essential experiential themes. The investigation will examine how guidance services shape students' academic participation, emotional resilience, interpersonal relationships, institutional connectedness, and help-seeking behaviors. Particular attention will be given to perceived accessibility, confidentiality, responsiveness, and the institutional conditions influencing service utilization. The study is expected to contribute contextualized insights into the evolving role of guidance offices as student engagement partners and to inform the development of inclusive, proactive, and student-centered support programs in Philippine higher education.

Keywords: student engagement; guidance office services; lived experiences; phenomenology; higher education; student support services; institutional belonging

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I. Introduction

Student engagement has emerged as a fundamental indicator of educational quality, institutional effectiveness, and student success in higher education. Beyond students' physical presence in classrooms, engagement encompasses their behavioral participation, emotional investment, cognitive involvement, and sense of connection with the academic community. It reflects the extent to which learners actively participate in educational experiences, establish meaningful relationships, demonstrate commitment to learning, and perceive themselves as valued members of their institutions. In contemporary higher education, student engagement is increasingly recognized as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped not only by instructional practices but also by institutional support systems, psychosocial conditions, and students' everyday experiences within the university or college environment.

Kahu (2013) conceptualized student engagement as a complex and dynamic phenomenon influenced by psychological, sociocultural, and institutional factors. Similarly, Fredricks et al. (2004) identified behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement as interconnected dimensions that influence students' educational experiences. These perspectives suggest that meaningful engagement cannot be understood exclusively through academic performance, attendance, or classroom participation. Rather, it requires consideration of the broader institutional environment, including the services and relationships that enable students to navigate academic pressures, personal challenges, and social transitions.

Within this context, guidance offices occupy an important yet frequently underestimated position in higher education. Traditionally associated with individual counseling, psychological assessment, career guidance, and crisis intervention, guidance offices have progressively expanded their functions to include preventive programs, student development initiatives, psychosocial education, academic adjustment assistance, and referral services. These institutional responsibilities position guidance offices as potential contributors to student engagement, particularly when their services address the psychological, social, and developmental conditions that influence students' willingness and capacity to participate meaningfully in college life.

The relationship between student support and educational engagement is particularly relevant among college students navigating the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood. During this period, students may encounter academic uncertainty, financial pressures, interpersonal conflicts, identity-related concerns, family expectations, and questions about their future careers. Such experiences can influence academic motivation, emotional stability, institutional attachment, and decisions regarding educational persistence. Arnett (2000) described emerging adulthood as a developmental period characterized by exploration and transition, underscoring the importance of responsive institutional environments that recognize students' evolving developmental needs.

Guidance offices may help students interpret these experiences, develop adaptive coping strategies, strengthen interpersonal competencies, and identify available institutional resources. However, the effectiveness of such services cannot be adequately understood through administrative indicators alone, such as the number of counseling sessions conducted or students

served. Their educational significance must also be examined through students' personal accounts of how institutional support influences their motivation, belonging, participation, and willingness to remain engaged in college.

In the Philippine higher education context, guidance and counseling services operate within an institutional environment shaped by national educational policies, professional standards, and growing attention to student mental health and well-being. Republic Act No. 9258, or the Guidance and Counseling Act of 2004, establishes the professional regulation of guidance and counseling, while Republic Act No. 11036, or the Philippine Mental Health Act, provides a broader policy foundation for promoting mental health across educational settings. These legal frameworks underscore the importance of accessible and professionally delivered student support services.

Nevertheless, the existence of guidance offices does not necessarily guarantee that students perceive their services as accessible, relevant, confidential, or responsive. Students may approach guidance personnel with varying expectations, while some may hesitate to seek assistance because of perceived stigma, uncertainty about service functions, concerns regarding confidentiality, or limited awareness of available programs. Such perceptions can shape the extent to which guidance services become meaningful components of students' educational experiences.

At Northeastern College in Santiago City, Isabela, the experiences of students who have interacted with guidance office services provide a relevant setting for examining these relationships. Rather than assuming that guidance services automatically improve student engagement, the present study investigates how students themselves understand, experience, and assign meaning to these institutional encounters.

A phenomenological perspective is particularly appropriate because the relationship between guidance services and student engagement may be expressed through personal experiences that are not readily captured by numerical indicators. Students may describe feelings of reassurance after counseling, increased confidence following career guidance, improved adjustment through supportive conversations, or frustration when institutional assistance does not meet their expectations. These accounts offer opportunities to understand how guidance services are experienced in practice and how students interpret their significance in relation to college engagement.

Accordingly, this study moves beyond the conventional perception of guidance offices as spaces primarily associated with counseling or problem resolution. It examines their potential roles as environments of connection, empowerment, institutional care, and student development. By foregrounding the lived experiences of Northeastern College students, the investigation seeks to contribute to a more holistic understanding of student engagement and to inform the development of guidance services that respond to students' academic, emotional, and social realities.

Although existing scholarship has extensively examined student engagement, academic persistence, psychological well-being, and institutional support, several areas warrant further

qualitative investigation.

First, much of the student engagement literature emphasizes classroom experiences, instructional strategies, academic integration, and institutional outcomes. The specific ways students experience guidance office services as contributors to engagement remain less clearly articulated within this literature. Second, research on guidance and counseling frequently focuses on mental health outcomes, counseling effectiveness, service satisfaction, and help-seeking behavior. These dimensions are important, but they do not fully explain how students connect guidance encounters with academic participation, institutional belonging, interpersonal engagement, and educational persistence. Third, there is a need for context-sensitive inquiry into students' experiences within Philippine private higher education institutions, where institutional resources, cultural expectations, interpersonal relationships, and service-delivery practices may shape students' engagement with support services. Finally, quantitative assessments of guidance service effectiveness may identify satisfaction levels or utilization patterns without fully explaining the meanings students attach to their interactions with guidance personnel. The present study addresses these conceptual and contextual gaps by examining guidance office services through the lived experiences of students, with particular attention to the relationship between institutional support and multidimensional student engagement.

1.3 Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to explore and understand the lived experiences of Northeastern College students regarding student engagement through guidance office services in Santiago City, Isabela.

Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Describe students' lived experiences in accessing and utilizing guidance office services.
2. Explore how students perceive the influence of guidance office services on their academic, emotional, behavioral, and social engagement.
3. Examine the challenges, barriers, and enabling conditions students encounter when seeking guidance office assistance.
4. Interpret the meanings students attach to guidance office services in relation to institutional belonging, personal development, and educational persistence.
5. Develop an evidence-informed framework for strengthening student engagement through responsive and student-centered guidance office services.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The study offers potential contributions to higher education research, guidance and counseling practice, and institutional student development.

For students, the investigation provides an opportunity to articulate experiences, expectations, and concerns regarding institutional guidance services. For guidance counselors and student

affairs personnel, the findings may inform more accessible, developmentally appropriate, and engagement-oriented interventions. For college administrators, the study may offer evidence for strengthening institutional policies, allocating resources, and integrating guidance programs into broader student success initiatives.

At the scholarly level, the study extends discussions of student engagement by examining guidance office encounters as lived institutional experiences rather than solely as service transactions. Its phenomenological orientation may provide a contextual understanding of how students interpret support, care, confidentiality, responsiveness, and belonging within a Philippine higher education institution.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Student Engagement as a Multidimensional Educational Experience

Student engagement represents an important construct in understanding how students interact with learning opportunities, institutional environments, and educational communities. Fredricks et al. (2004) proposed a multidimensional perspective encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Behavioral engagement concerns participation in academic activities and institutional responsibilities; emotional engagement involves students' feelings toward learning, teachers, peers, and the institution; and cognitive engagement refers to psychological investment, self-regulation, and willingness to undertake intellectually demanding tasks.

Kahu (2013) argued that engagement should be understood through an integrated framework that distinguishes the phenomenon itself from its antecedents and consequences. This distinction is essential because institutional support services may create conditions conducive to engagement without necessarily producing equivalent outcomes for every student. For instance, a supportive guidance encounter may strengthen a student's sense of belonging, but the subsequent influence on academic participation may depend on financial circumstances, peer relationships, learning experiences, and other contextual factors.

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Kahu and Nelson (2018) further developed the concept of the educational interface, describing the psychosocial space in which student characteristics and institutional conditions interact. Their framework emphasizes mechanisms such as belonging, self-efficacy, emotions, and well-being, which are particularly relevant to understanding the possible contributions of guidance office services. Rather than conceptualizing engagement as an exclusively individual responsibility, the educational interface highlights how institutional relationships and support structures shape students' opportunities to participate meaningfully in higher education.

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The present study adopts this multidimensional understanding while recognizing that engagement is experienced differently across students. Guidance office services are therefore examined not as predetermined causes of engagement but as institutional experiences whose meanings and perceived consequences require interpretation.

2.2 Guidance Office Services and Holistic Student Development

Guidance office services are commonly understood through their counseling functions; however, their institutional relevance extends to students' academic adjustment, career development, social functioning, and psychological well-being. A comprehensive approach to guidance recognizes that students' educational experiences are shaped by interconnected developmental needs.

From a student development perspective, guidance personnel may facilitate self-understanding, decision-making, conflict resolution, emotional regulation, and resource navigation. These functions are relevant because difficulties experienced outside the classroom can affect students' ability to concentrate, participate, complete academic requirements, and sustain positive institutional relationships.

The distinction between counseling and broader guidance services is analytically significant. Counseling may involve structured professional assistance for personal or psychological concerns, while other guidance services may include orientation activities, career planning, information dissemination, developmental seminars, referral coordination, and preventive educational programs. The availability of these services, however, should not be presumed in the research setting; their actual provision and implementation must be established through institutional documentation and participant accounts.

The present inquiry considers how students interpret these different forms of assistance and whether they perceive guidance office encounters as meaningful opportunities for support, connection, and development.

2.3 Institutional Support, Belonging, and Educational Persistence

Institutional belonging constitutes an important dimension of student experience because students' perceptions of acceptance, recognition, and connection may influence their motivation and willingness to remain involved in academic life.

Tinto (1993) emphasized the importance of academic and social integration in understanding student departure and institutional persistence. Although the theory has been developed and critiqued across different educational contexts, its central recognition of institutional relationships remains relevant to examining student engagement.

The significance of support relationships is also evident in Kahu et al. (2020), whose longitudinal investigation used student narratives to examine how personal and institutional factors interact throughout the first year of university. Their findings support the importance of understanding engagement as a changing experience shaped by the interaction of student circumstances and educational environments.

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Guidance offices may contribute to belonging when students experience interactions characterized by respect, recognition, responsiveness, and emotional safety. Conversely, students

may perceive institutional disconnection when services are difficult to access, interactions feel impersonal, or their concerns are not adequately addressed.

These possibilities demonstrate why student engagement should be investigated through both supportive and challenging experiences rather than through an exclusively positive interpretation of institutional guidance.

2.4 Help-Seeking Behavior and Perceived Barriers to Guidance Services

The availability of guidance services does not necessarily translate into their utilization. Help-seeking involves recognizing a need for assistance, evaluating available support, assessing potential interpersonal or institutional risks, and deciding whether to disclose personal concerns.

Rickwood et al. (2005) explained that help-seeking for mental health concerns is influenced by multiple developmental and psychosocial processes. Within higher education, students may experience uncertainty about when professional assistance is appropriate, whether their concerns are sufficiently serious, and whether seeking guidance might affect how others perceive them.

Perceived stigma, concerns about confidentiality, limited service awareness, scheduling difficulties, and discomfort with disclosure may influence students' decisions. However, the presence and significance of these barriers among Northeastern College students remain empirical questions rather than established findings.

A phenomenological investigation is particularly useful because it can illuminate the emotional and interpretive dimensions of help-seeking, including how students understand the guidance office before their first encounter, how their perceptions evolve through interaction, and how these experiences influence subsequent decisions to seek support.

2.5 The Philippine Higher Education Context

Student support services in Philippine higher education operate within a context shaped by professional regulation, institutional responsibilities, and national policies concerning mental health and student welfare.

Republic Act No. 9258 establishes the professional framework governing guidance and counseling practice in the Philippines. Republic Act No. 11036 further recognizes the importance of mental health promotion and the development of appropriate support mechanisms across institutional settings.

These policies provide a relevant backdrop for examining how institutional support is experienced by students. Nevertheless, legal recognition of guidance and mental health services does not establish their practical accessibility, quality, or perceived contribution to engagement.

Local institutional cultures, resource availability, students' socioeconomic circumstances, and interpersonal expectations may influence how guidance services are delivered and interpreted. Consequently, context-specific research is necessary to understand how students experience institutional support within their particular educational environment.

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

3.1 Theoretical Foundations

The study draws primarily on three complementary theoretical perspectives.

Student Engagement Framework (Kahu, 2013). This framework conceptualizes engagement as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by structural, psychosocial, and educational factors. It supports the investigation of how guidance services relate to students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement in college.

Educational Interface Framework (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). This perspective explains how institutional and individual influences interact through psychosocial mechanisms, including belonging, emotions, self-efficacy, and well-being. It provides a conceptual foundation for examining the possible connections between guidance experiences and student engagement.

Student Integration Theory (Tinto, 1993). This theory emphasizes the relationship between students' institutional experiences, academic and social integration, and persistence. It offers a supplementary lens for understanding students' perceptions of institutional belonging and their willingness to continue participating in college life.

These perspectives serve as sensitizing concepts rather than predetermined categories into which participant narratives must be forced. The phenomenological orientation requires that students' own descriptions remain central to the interpretation.

4. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach utilizing descriptive phenomenology to explore and understand the lived experiences of Northeastern College students regarding student engagement through guidance office services in Santiago City, Isabela, Philippines. Anchored in Husserlian phenomenology, the investigation focused on understanding how students perceived, interpreted, and assigned meaning to their experiences with institutional guidance services, particularly in relation to academic participation, emotional well-being, interpersonal relationships, personal development, and institutional belonging. The study adopted Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological approach to systematically examine participants' narratives and uncover the essential meanings embedded in their experiences. The research was conducted at Northeastern College, which provided the institutional context for examining the contributions of guidance office services to students' educational experiences. Purposive sampling was employed to identify college students who possessed firsthand experiences of accessing or participating in guidance office services, with participant selection guided by the richness and relevance of their experiences. The selection criteria included official enrollment at the institution, a minimum age of 18 years, previous utilization of at least one guidance office service, and willingness to participate voluntarily in the research. Consideration was given to variations in academic programs, year levels, gender, and types of guidance services experienced to capture diverse perspectives on the phenomenon. Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews using a researcher-developed interview guide consisting of open-ended questions that

explored participants' expectations, actual experiences, emotional responses, perceived academic and social implications, challenges in accessing services, and recommendations for institutional improvement. The interview guide was designed to encourage comprehensive descriptions of personal experiences while allowing the researchers to ask probing questions for clarification and deeper understanding. Individual interviews were conducted in settings conducive to privacy, confidentiality, and open communication, with participants encouraged to express their experiences in a language with which they were comfortable. Interview recordings were transcribed and systematically examined, while field notes and reflexive observations provided supplementary contextual information. Data analysis followed Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological procedure, which involved familiarization with participants' accounts, identification of significant statements, formulation of meanings, organization of meanings into thematic clusters, development of exhaustive descriptions, synthesis of the fundamental structure of the phenomenon, and validation of interpretations through participant feedback. The researchers practiced phenomenological bracketing and reflexivity to minimize the influence of preconceived assumptions and maintain sensitivity to participants' authentic perspectives. Emerging themes were examined in relation to emotional safety and institutional care, academic motivation and personal agency, institutional connectedness and belonging, barriers to guidance service utilization, and proactive student engagement. To establish methodological rigor, the study was guided by Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was addressed through careful examination of participant narratives and validation of interpretations; transferability was supported through contextual descriptions of the research setting and participants' experiences; dependability was strengthened through systematic documentation of research procedures and analytical decisions; and confirmability was promoted through reflexive journaling and the preservation of an audit trail connecting interpretations with the original data. The Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) developed by Tong et al. (2007) also informed the transparent presentation of the research procedures. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the investigation, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity in reporting, and respect for participants' autonomy. Participants were assigned identification codes, such as P1, P2, and P3, to safeguard their identities, while interview transcripts and related research materials were handled in accordance with institutional ethical standards and the provisions of Republic Act No. 10173, otherwise known as the Philippine Data Privacy Act of 2012. Through these methodological procedures, the study sought to generate a contextualized and phenomenologically grounded understanding of how guidance office services were experienced by college students and how these experiences contributed to their perceptions of engagement, institutional support, and holistic educational development.

5. Results and Findings

The phenomenological analysis was organized around five thematic dimensions concerning the lived experiences of Northeastern College students with guidance office services in Santiago City, Isabela. These dimensions encompassed emotional safety and institutional care, academic motivation and personal agency, institutional connection and belonging, barriers to guidance service utilization, and the perceived importance of proactive student engagement initiatives.

Collectively, the themes provided an interpretive framework for understanding the role of guidance services beyond conventional counseling functions.

Theme 1. Guidance Office as a Space of Emotional Safety and Institutional Care

The first thematic dimension highlighted the significance of emotional safety, interpersonal recognition, and institutional care in students' experiences with guidance office services. Within this dimension, guidance encounters were examined as relational experiences in which confidentiality, empathy, respectful communication, and attentive listening shaped students' perceptions of institutional support.

The theme underscored the importance of considering how students experienced the interpersonal environment of the guidance office. Supportive encounters could be interpreted through students' feelings of reassurance, acceptance, and confidence in expressing personal concerns. Conversely, experiences involving discomfort, perceived judgment, or uncertainty about confidentiality could reveal conditions that constrained students' willingness to seek institutional assistance.

From a phenomenological perspective, emotional safety represented more than the physical availability of counseling facilities. It concerned the meanings students attached to interactions with guidance personnel and the extent to which those interactions contributed to their perception of being recognized and valued within the institution.

The significance of this theme can be understood through Kahu and Nelson's (2018) educational interface framework, which identifies emotions, well-being, and belonging as important psychosocial mechanisms associated with student engagement.

Theme 2. Guidance Encounters as Pathways to Academic Motivation and Personal Agency

The second thematic dimension concerned the relationship between guidance experiences, academic motivation, and students' perceptions of personal agency. It addressed the ways institutional assistance could become meaningful when students encountered academic uncertainty, difficulties in decision-making, competing responsibilities, or concerns regarding their educational futures.

The analysis of this dimension centered on how students interpreted guidance encounters in relation to self-confidence, problem-solving, academic commitment, and their capacity to make informed decisions. These experiences were relevant to understanding guidance services as potential sources of developmental support rather than interventions limited to personal difficulties.

Personal agency was particularly important because student engagement involves active participation in learning and the ability to navigate academic responsibilities. Guidance experiences could be understood as contributing to agency when students associated them with clearer educational goals, increased confidence, or a greater willingness to address academic challenges.

This interpretation was consistent with the multidimensional understanding of engagement advanced by Fredricks et al. (2004), particularly the cognitive and behavioral dimensions of educational participation.

Theme 3. Beyond Individual Counseling: Guidance Services as Sources of Connection and Belonging

The third thematic dimension focused on the social and institutional meanings associated with guidance office experiences. It examined guidance services in relation to students' sense of connection with peers, institutional personnel, and the broader college community.

Institutional belonging constituted an important analytical concern because students' educational experiences were shaped not only by academic requirements but also by their perceptions of acceptance, recognition, and social inclusion. Guidance office encounters provided a relevant context for exploring how students interpreted the institution's concern for their welfare.

This dimension also expanded the conceptualization of guidance services beyond individualized counseling. Developmental activities, institutional referrals, student support interactions, and other guidance-related experiences could provide opportunities for students to develop connections with the college community.

The interpretation aligned with Tinto's (1993) emphasis on institutional integration and Kahu and Nelson's (2018) recognition of belonging as a mechanism associated with student engagement.

Theme 4. Negotiating Barriers: Stigma, Accessibility, and Trust in Guidance Services

The fourth thematic dimension addressed the challenges and considerations associated with accessing guidance office services. It focused on the relationship between students' help-seeking decisions and their perceptions of service accessibility, confidentiality, institutional responsiveness, and interpersonal trust.

Within this dimension, potential barriers included uncertainty regarding the functions of the guidance office, concerns about disclosure, perceived stigma, scheduling difficulties, and discomfort with seeking professional assistance. These factors provided relevant categories for examining how students navigated institutional support systems.

The theme also recognized that students' decisions to seek guidance could involve complex personal and social considerations. Their willingness to approach guidance personnel could be influenced by previous encounters, expectations regarding confidentiality, and perceptions of whether the services would address their concerns.

This dimension was consistent with Rickwood et al.'s (2005) discussion of help-seeking as a process influenced by psychological and social factors.

Theme 5. Reimagining the Guidance Office as a Proactive Partner in Student Engagement

The fifth thematic dimension concerned students' expectations of guidance services as components of holistic student development. It extended the analysis from individual guidance encounters to the broader institutional practices through which students could experience support and engagement.

The dimension addressed the potential relevance of preventive programs, academic adjustment assistance, career development initiatives, peer-support activities, and accessible communication mechanisms. These areas represented possible directions for understanding how guidance offices could respond to students' educational and developmental needs.

A proactive orientation to guidance services emphasized the importance of addressing student concerns before they developed into more serious academic, emotional, or interpersonal difficulties. It also recognized the value of integrating guidance initiatives with broader institutional student engagement strategies.

The significance of this dimension lay in its potential to inform a more comprehensive understanding of guidance offices as partners in student development, institutional belonging, and meaningful educational participation.

Table 1. Thematic Matrix of the Lived Experiences of Northeastern College Students

Themes	Central experiential focus	Dimension of student engagement
1. Emotional Safety and Institutional Care	Trust, empathy, emotional reassurance, confidentiality, and recognition	Emotional engagement
2. Academic Motivation and Personal Agency	Self-efficacy, academic commitment, decision-making, and personal development	Cognitive and academic engagement
3. Connection and Institutional Belonging	Institutional relationships, social acceptance, recognition, and connectedness	Social and emotional engagement
4. Barriers, Accessibility, and Trust	Stigma, service awareness, privacy concerns, accessibility, and help-seeking	Behavioral engagement
5. Proactive Student Engagement	Developmental support, institutional responsiveness, preventive programs, and student empowerment	Multidimensional engagement

Integrative Synthesis of the Themes

Taken together, the five thematic dimensions established an analytical perspective through which guidance office services could be examined as part of students' broader educational experiences. Emotional safety and institutional care addressed the interpersonal conditions of support;

academic motivation and personal agency concerned students' educational development; connection and belonging emphasized institutional relationships; barriers and trust reflected the complexity of help-seeking; and proactive student engagement highlighted opportunities for strengthening student-centered services.

These dimensions also demonstrated the conceptual importance of examining guidance offices beyond their traditional counseling responsibilities. The study's phenomenological orientation provided a means of understanding institutional support through the meanings students attached to their encounters with guidance personnel and related programs.

The final synthesis should establish which dimensions were supported by participants' accounts, how they interacted, and whether any contradictory or unexpected experiences emerged.

6. Discussion

The study's eventual findings should be interpreted in relation to the multidimensional nature of student engagement and the institutional conditions shaping students' experiences. The following discussion identifies the theoretical questions that the completed analysis can address.

6.1 Guidance Services and the Psychosocial Foundations of Engagement

Kahu and Nelson's (2018) educational interface framework provides a useful perspective for interpreting the significance of guidance office encounters. Their conceptualization suggests that institutional conditions and student characteristics interact through psychosocial mechanisms that influence engagement.

Within this framework, guidance services may be understood as part of the institutional environment that students encounter while navigating academic and personal challenges. If participants describe guidance encounters as strengthening confidence, emotional security, or belonging, such experiences may be interpreted as examples of how institutional relationships become meaningful within the educational interface.

However, the relationship should not be treated as automatically beneficial. Negative or ineffective encounters may also shape students' perceptions of institutional support. An important contribution of the completed study would therefore be its capacity to identify the conditions under which guidance services are experienced as supportive, irrelevant, or discouraging.

6.2 Reconsidering the Traditional Counseling-Centered Model

The title Beyond Counseling reflects a conceptual interest in examining guidance offices as broader student development environments.

A counseling-centered interpretation may emphasize individual difficulties and remedial interventions. A wider student engagement perspective recognizes that institutional support may also involve preventive education, academic adjustment, interpersonal development, career exploration, and students' sense of participation in college life.

The completed findings may help clarify whether students themselves distinguish between counseling and other guidance functions and how these distinctions influence their expectations and service utilization.

This interpretation would contribute to discussions of holistic student development by examining institutional support from the perspective of those receiving it.

6.3 Institutional Belonging and Student Persistence

Tinto's (1993) work provides a theoretical basis for discussing the relationship between institutional integration and persistence. The present study may extend this discussion by examining whether guidance office encounters contribute to students' subjective experiences of institutional belonging.

Students may interpret attentive guidance personnel as evidence of institutional care, while unresponsive encounters may influence perceptions of disconnection. These possibilities require empirical confirmation through participants' narratives.

The study cannot establish that guidance services cause improved retention or academic success. Its contribution is instead to explain how students understand the relationship between guidance experiences, their sense of belonging, and their intentions to remain engaged in college.

6.4 Implications for Philippine Higher Education

The findings may have practical implications for guidance offices in Philippine higher education institutions, particularly those seeking to integrate student welfare with academic and developmental support.

An evidence-informed approach would recognize that students differ in their needs, expectations, and willingness to seek assistance. Institutional responsiveness therefore requires more than maintaining a formally designated guidance office; it involves examining how services are communicated, accessed, delivered, and experienced.

The completed research may inform initiatives such as student orientation improvements, confidential appointment systems, career development activities, coordinated academic referrals, and feedback mechanisms. These should be framed as potential institutional responses to documented student needs, not as interventions whose effectiveness has already been established.

7. Proposed Student Engagement Framework

Based on the study's conceptual foundations, an initial framework may be proposed for subsequent refinement through empirical findings.

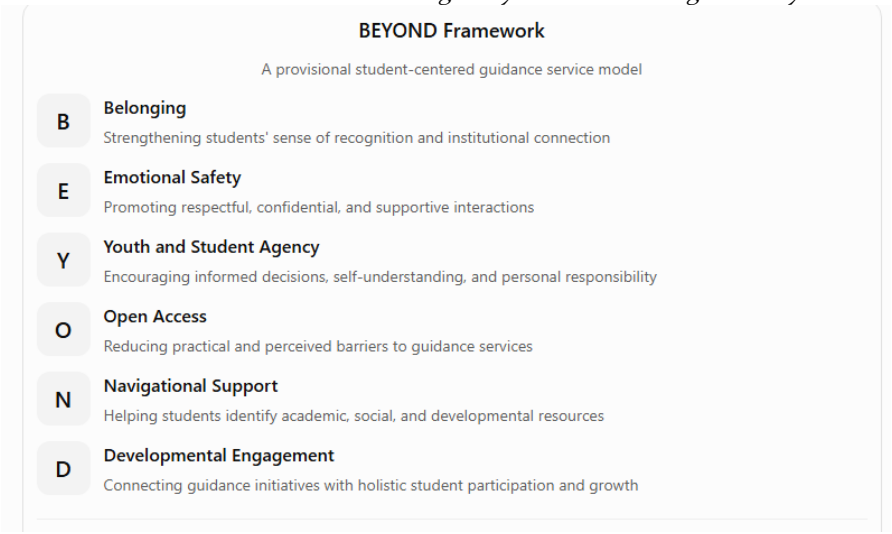


Figure 2. Preliminary BEYOND Framework. Its components require validation and possible revision using the completed phenomenological findings.

The framework emphasizes that guidance services may be most relevant to engagement when they address students' experiences of belonging, emotional safety, agency, accessibility, institutional navigation, and developmental participation.

The final model should be revised to reflect the actual themes emerging from the interviews, including any unexpected dimensions not represented in the preliminary framework.

8. Conclusion

This manuscript establishes a phenomenological approach to understanding student engagement through guidance office services at Northeastern College in Santiago City, Isabela. It argues that guidance offices warrant examination beyond their traditional association with counseling because students' institutional support experiences may involve academic adjustment, emotional well-being, social relationships, help-seeking, and perceptions of belonging.

The theoretical synthesis highlights the importance of understanding student engagement as a multidimensional and context-dependent phenomenon shaped by interactions between individual circumstances and institutional environments. The proposed methodology provides a means of examining these interactions through students' firsthand descriptions, while the preliminary thematic structure identifies relevant areas for empirical investigation.

The study's anticipated scholarly contribution lies in clarifying how students experience and interpret guidance services within their broader educational lives. Its practical contribution will depend on identifying specific institutional practices that students perceive as supportive, inaccessible, or insufficiently responsive.

Definitive conclusions about the experiences of Northeastern College students cannot be drawn until the interviews have been conducted and systematically analyzed. Once completed, the research may provide an evidence-informed foundation for strengthening guidance office services as components of inclusive, responsive, and student-centered higher education.

9. Recommendations

The following preliminary recommendations should be assessed against the completed study's findings.

1. Strengthen student-centered guidance services. Guidance offices should periodically examine students' expressed needs and experiences to ensure that available services remain relevant and accessible.

2. Integrate guidance programs with broader student engagement initiatives. Institutions may consider coordinated approaches involving guidance personnel, academic departments, student affairs offices, and student organizations.

3. Promote confidential and accessible help-seeking pathways. Clear communication regarding service functions, confidentiality procedures, appointment arrangements, and referral mechanisms may help students make informed decisions about seeking assistance.

4. Develop preventive and developmental programs. Guidance initiatives may extend to academic adjustment, career exploration, interpersonal development, and student well-being where these needs are established.

5. Institutionalize student feedback mechanisms. Anonymous service evaluations and participatory consultations may help institutions identify barriers and improve service delivery.

6. Conduct subsequent research. Future studies may use mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to examine whether particular guidance interventions are associated with measurable changes in student engagement, academic persistence, and well-being.

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