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Paving the Path to Permanence: Filipino HEI Instructors' Experience of Balancing Work and Studies in Pursuit of Permanent Teaching Positions

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ABSTRACT

While the Commission on Higher Education of the Philippines mandates graduate degrees for college instructors, the lived experiences of these educators pursuing them amidst demanding schedules and unclear career goals remain under-researched. Hence, this study explored the lived experiences of SUC instructors pursuing graduate degrees as part of the minimum job requirement. Through online posting, a total of 12 participants were recruited from different state colleges and universities in the Philippines. Eight participants were interviewed in-depth, and the other 4 participants had focus group discussions. Themes emerged, focusing on challenges regarding time management issues, an overwhelming workload, and job security concerns. These challenges underscore the urgent need for interventions to support these educators. Regarding their coping mechanisms, they observed help-seeking behavior and strategic rest for well-being. As to their insights, institutional financial support transcends. Conclusively, the main essence of completing their graduate degree is to achieve knowledge to feel empowered and as a path to permanence. These themes highlight the need for a specific intervention addressing time management, career planning, help-seeking behavior, financial literacy, and motivation regulation.

INTRODUCTION

In today's competitive job market, a graduate degree has become increasingly important, with journalists dubbing it the new bachelor's degree (Blagg, 2018). The motivations for pursuing this advanced degree are diverse. Some, like students in Hong Kong (Jung & Li, 2021), seek personal growth and a climb up the career ladder. Background factors also influence these decisions. Students from various genders, ages, socioeconomic situations, and academic backgrounds are driven by different goals (Durso *et al.,* 2016; Jung & Lee, 2019). Even within professions, the need for continuous learning is evident. Physicians, for instance, are increasingly pursuing advanced degrees to stay relevant in a rapidly evolving medical field (Lubin, 2024). Ultimately, the decision to pursue a graduate degree is multifaceted, shaped by both personal aspirations and external pressures.

Earning a graduate degree is a demanding journey. The relentless coursework, research, and projects pile up, forcing students into a constant balancing act (Salmons *et al.,* 2023). Unlike professors with flexible workloads, graduate students juggle work deadlines, academic assignments, personal needs, and the desire for social connection (Pope-Ruark, 2022). This constant prioritization becomes a daily tightrope walk fueled by stress and anxiety. The financial burden of the program adds another layer of pressure. However, despite the challenges, the rewards of a graduate degree make the pursuit worthwhile.

The global call for more postgraduate students creates a complex situation for universities (Masduki, 2022). While enrollment numbers rise, a surprising gap exists in understanding why some part-time graduate students, especially at public universities, abandon their studies while others push through (Rotem *et al.,* 2021). In Africa, adult learners in postgraduate programs face additional hurdles like limited computer skills, research experience, and internet access, contributing to longer completion times (Motseke, 2016). Additionally, South Africa's higher education system adds another layer of complexity. A surge in student demand for graduate degrees clashes with a new government funding model that differentiates between research and coursework programs (De Klerk, 2023).

Conversely, a qualitative study in Taiwan found that graduate students dissatisfied with their studies lacked prior motivation and preparation (Chang *et al.,* 2022). On the other hand, a survey in Turkey indicated that students were mostly positive about obtaining a graduate degree despite acknowledging challenges (Kaplan & Cosgun, 2023). Similarly, research on aspiring school administrators found that their primary motivators were personal and professional growth rather than financial gain (Orsuwan & Siriparp, 2023). This aligns with the potential motivations of faculty pursuing graduate degrees, who may seek to enhance their knowledge, skills, and career prospects.

The Philippines is complex for State Universities and Colleges (SUC) instructors pursuing graduate degrees. While a graduate degree is mandatory for faculty (CMO No. 52, S. 2007), a recent policy requiring research publication adds another hurdle (CMO No. 15, S. 2019). This reinforces the pressure on instructors to invest in professional development, aligning with Cagasan &

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Belonias' (2020) finding that career advancement is a key motivator for graduate studies. Skills development, job promotions, and personal/professional growth contribute to career advancement. However, a significant gap exists in research exploring the specific experiences of SUC instructors who are in the course of pursuing their graduate studies. The study could shed light on the experiences of SUC instructors pursuing graduate degrees to create policies that better support SUC instructors in their academic pursuits, balancing professional development with their teaching duties. Ultimately, this study aims to improve the overall experience of SUC instructors pursuing graduate degrees, potentially leading to a more qualified and motivated teaching force in the Philippines.

The study aimed to understand faculty members' experiences pursuing a graduate degree to secure a regular position at a state university or college. Furthermore, the study investigated the motivations behind their pursuit and the challenges it created. Faculty who juggled work and studies, faced financial strain, or experienced negative impacts on well-being were all areas this research explored. Ultimately, the goal was to identify ways to support faculty in their academic pursuit.

Research Questions

1. What challenges are SUC instructors facing pursuing master's degrees in compliance with their employment minimum requirement?

2. What are the coping mechanisms of SUC instructors pursuing master's degrees in compliance with their employment minimum requirement?

3. What are the insights of SUC instructors pursuing master's degrees in compliance with their employment minimum requirement?

4. What is the essence of the phenomenon for the participants?

LITERATURE REVIEW
McClelland's Needs Theory and Education
McClelland's Needs Theory, also known as the Acquired-Needs Theory, posits that individuals' specific needs are acquired over time through life experiences (Siok *et al.,* 2023). McClelland's Needs Theory provides a valuable lens through which to examine the motivations of college instructors pursuing master's degrees. This theory proposes three primary needs that drive human behavior: the need for achievement (nAch), the need for power (nPow), and the need for affiliation (nAff) (Clayton & Ritter, 2023).

Academic hardiness, a concept rooted in resilience (Judkins *et al.,* 2020), is crucial for educators, especially those pursuing a master's degree (Abdollahi *et al.,* 2020). Academic hardiness allows them to persevere as they navigate the ever-changing educational landscape with new teaching methods, student demands, and social contexts (Plutzer *et al.,* 2020). Teachers high in need for achievement might be particularly driven to pursue a

master's degree, and their hardiness helps them manage the complexity of this additional workload (Tu & Chen, 2019). Similarly, those high in the need for power can benefit from this resilience as they navigate the demanding professional environment (Abdollahi *et al.,* 2020). Ultimately, academic hardiness allows educators to overcome challenges, stay dedicated to their subject matter, and provide their students with higher education (Chen & Tu, 2019). It becomes a cornerstone of their professional identity and contributes to their well-being and job satisfaction.

Teacher commitment, a key factor in successful educational reforms (Cansoy *et al.,* 2022), reflects dedication to the school and students (Christ *et al.,* 2022). Teachers high in the need for achievement might be driven to excel in their roles, leading to a strong commitment to teaching and student success (Poekert *et al.,* 2020). Similarly, those high in the need for affiliation might find fulfillment in their relationships with students and colleagues, fostering a more substantial commitment to the school community (Ju *et al.,* 2021). Teacher commitment encompasses various aspects, including identification with the school's goals (Ju *et al.,* 2021), a willingness to adapt to changing practices (Wang *et al.,* 2021), and a strong emotional attachment to the teaching profession (Liu & Bellibas, 2018).

Despite potentially fulfilling needs for achievement or affiliation, teaching is demonstrably stressful (Sadeghi *et al.,* 2021). Multiple stressors like disruptive students, heavy workloads, and emotional demands (Agyapong *et al.,* 2022) can lead to burnout, especially when coupled with insufficient resources (Spector, 2022). This highlights the importance of teacher support systems (Mulhollan & O'Connor, 2016).

McClelland's Needs Theory and Employment Status
Regular and temporary employment statuses differ (Augustsson & Rasmusson, 2018). While regular employees get all the benefits they can enjoy with the organization, temporary employees are compelled to meet the demands set by the organization to seal their fate. On the other hand, regular employees tend to focus on community and organizational perspectives, safeguarding a cohesive unit, while temporary employees are more task-oriented and self-focused. Additionally, employment type significantly impacts health-related quality of life, with temporary workers generally experiencing lower quality of life than regular workers. Regular workers have higher subjective health status than non-regular workers (Sohn, 2011). Factors influencing health status include economic status, age, gender, education, and marital status (Chambel & Castanheira, 2007).

On the other hand, employment status and career development are crucial aspects that impact individuals differently. Research highlights the significance of finding talents with development potential based on personal backgrounds and education statuses for career advancement (Wang *et al.,* 2019). In Canada, the emphasis

on employment status as the primary indicator of success in career counseling is challenged, suggesting the importance of considering outcomes like further training for long-term financial productivity through employment equivalence measurements (Conger & Hiebert, 2007).

The debate around the employability of graduate studies in academia (Underdahl *et al.,* 2023) highlights the multifaceted motivations for pursuing them. While a need for achievement might drive some educators and a desire for a traditional academic career path (Robson, 2023), others might be motivated by a need for power and seek advancement opportunities within the academic system (Billett, 2022). Regardless of motivation, ensuring graduates are well-equipped for the job market is crucial (Fellows, 2023). Partnerships between universities and employers (Masduki *et al.,* 2022) can bridge skill gaps and prepare graduates for successful careers, aligning with the growing emphasis on adaptability in today's workforce (Billett, 2022).

Conversely, teacher turnover, a major issue in education (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023), is partly fueled by occupational stress (Carroll *et al.,* 2022). While McClelland's Needs Theory suggests teaching could fulfill needs for achievement or affiliation, the reality can differ. Factors like heavy workloads and emotional demands (Agyapong *et al.,* 2022) lead to burnout (Kim *et al.,* 2020; Rave *et al.,* 2022), impacting not only teacher well-being (Tai *et al.,* 2019; Gurrea, 2021) but also student learning (Febriantina & Aliyyah, 2020; Toropova *et al.,* 2019; bin Abdullah, 2021). This highlights the need for support systems that address these stressors, ultimately creating a more stable and effective teaching force (Marks, 2023).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study delved into the lived experiences of faculty pressured to complete a graduate degree (i.e., master's degree) using a qualitative method, specifically transcendental phenomenology. This approach, pioneered by Husserl (Moustakas, 1994), has been a cornerstone of qualitative research and aimed to understand human experience. In the context of transcendental phenomenology, researchers strived to bracket or set aside preconceived notions (epoche) to gain a clearer understanding of the phenomenon itself. This allowed the genuine meaning of the experience to emerge organically, capturing its unique essence for the participants. By employing this approach, the study sought to explore the unfiltered experiences of faculty members who had navigated the journey to obtain a master's degree. As Larsen & Adu (2021) suggested, phenomenological studies aimed to describe these lived experiences, making transcendental phenomenology a well-suited method for this research.

Research Participants

To ensure a well-rounded understanding of the experiences of completing a master's degree, this study recruited faculty members from state universities and colleges across various employment types. This included faculty on service contracts and those who held regular temporary positions. The research was able to ask for the participation of eight instructors for in-depth interviews and four instructors for a focus group discussion. The research aimed to capture a broader spectrum of experiences by including diverse participants.

Data Sources

The study utilized two qualitative data collection methods to gain a deeper understanding of faculty experiences: in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. These in-depth conversations allowed participants to share their unique perspectives and experiences surrounding the pressure of completing a master's degree. A semi-structured interview guide was crafted to explore the experiences of participants. This guide aimed to delve into the lived experiences of participants. Questions are anchored on the four research questions, with follow-up questions to areas where researchers wished to obtain richer data. As such, the transcendental phenomenological method was observed. It underwent a validity test to ensure the interview guide effectively elicited the intended information.

Data Collection

This research followed a series of steps to ensure a rigorous and ethical data collection process. First, an interview guide was developed, exploring faculty experiences with open-ended questions. This guide was pilot-tested and refined for clarity and effectiveness. Second, experts reviewed the guide to establish validity in eliciting the intended data. Following validity checking, recruitment began. Online postings detailed the study's purpose, eligibility criteria, and participation details. Once participants were recruited, interviews and focus groups were scheduled at their convenience. Informed consent was obtained before each session, ensuring participants understood the research and their rights.

Data collection involved conducting in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. All sessions were audio-recorded with participant consent to ensure accuracy and facilitate later analysis. Transcripts were created from the recordings for data management. These transcripts were anonymized to protect confidentiality and securely stored. Member checking was incorporated to ensure participant experiences were accurately reflected in the findings.

Data Analysis

Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data gathered. This qualitative data analysis method involves reading through data (like transcripts from interviews or focus groups) and searching for significant patterns (Delve *et al.,* 2020). The researcher employed inductive thematic analysis following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). In their 2006 paper, Braun and Clarke enumerated the steps involved in thematic analysis:

(1) Familiarization with the data,
(2) Initial coding,
(3) Collating codes with supporting data,
(4) Searching for themes,
(5) Reviewing themes, and
(6) Writing the narrative.

Trustworthiness of the Study
The researchers outlined and detailed the participant selection process to ensure the study's trustworthiness. This included specifying how participants were recruited and whether they represented various institutions and academic disciplines.

Furthermore, the researchers employed multiple data collection methods, such as interviews and focus groups, to gain a well-rounded understanding of the phenomenon under study. Well-developed, open-ended interview questions were essential to encourage participants to share rich and detailed responses. As such, the questionnaire underwent rigorous validation by experts to increase the likelihood of encapsulating the participants' experiences. Regarding transparency and credibility, the researchers acknowledged their biases and how they might have influenced the study design and interpretation of findings. Therefore, involving multiple researchers in data collection and analysis helped minimize bias and ensured a more comprehensive understanding of the instructors' experiences. Additionally, providing detailed descriptions of the participants, including their subject areas and experience levels, allowed interested parties to assess the applicability of the study's conclusions to other contexts. Finally, the researchers reported the findings in detail to enable other researchers to replicate the methods and evaluate the trustworthiness of the findings.

Ethical Considerations
In this study, ethical principles were paramount to protect participants' rights and well-being (Creswell *et al.,* 2006). Researchers ensured informed consent by thoroughly explaining the project, potential risks and benefits, and participants' right to withdraw at any time (Millum & Bromwich, 2021). Confidentiality and privacy were upheld by anonymizing and storing data securely (Resnik, 2018). Respect for participants was emphasized through voluntary participation, sensitivity to their experiences, and withholding unwanted treatment based on their responses (Kosche *et al.,* 2021).

Researchers also ensured ethical data collection and analysis by being transparent in their methods and avoiding data manipulation (Mbanaso *et al.,* 2023). Triangulation mitigated researcher bias (Mbanaso *et al.,* 2023). Finally, the potential impact on the academic community was considered. Researchers built trust and rapport, were mindful of power dynamics, and ensured the research would benefit the community (Mosurska & Ford, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
The research participants comprised 12 SUC instructors (nine females and three males); nine were single, and three were married. Their ages ranged from 24 to 38 years old. Notably, all participants were self-funded with no scholarships, and six were family breadwinners. On their graduate program stage, six were in the crucial thesis writing stage, three were in their second year, two were nearing completion with final defenses scheduled, and one had temporarily halted studies for the current semester. Four instructors were studying at state colleges and universities, while eight were pursuing their graduate degrees in private institutions.

Table 1: Profile of the Participants

Code Name	Sex	Status	Graduate Program Stage	Enrolled Schools
R1	Female	Single	Thesis Writing	State University
R2	Female	Single	Thesis Writing	Private Institution
R3	Male	Single	Second year	State College
R4	Female	Single	Second year	Private Institution
R5	Female	Single	Not enrolled in the current semester	Private Institution
R6	Female	Married	Thesis Writing	Private Institution
R7	Female	Single	For final defense	Private Institution
R8	Female	Married	Thesis Writing	State University
FGD1	Female	Single	For final defense	Private Institution
FGD2	Male	Single	Thesis Writing	Private Institution
FGD3	Male	Married	Second year	State University
FGD4	Female	Single	Thesis Writing	Private Institution

Challenges of SUC Instructors Pursuing Their Master's Degree to Comply with Employment Minimum Requirements
Table 2 presents the themes of the challenges of SUC instructors completing their master's degree in compliance

with the minimum job requirement. The tables also show sample narratives from the participants, providing statements that validate the themes while presenting the evidence. As indicated in the second column, core ideas are the main analytic description of themes.

Table 2: Challenges of SUC instructors pursuing master's degree

Narrative	Core Ideas	Emerging Themes
R1. "My struggles stem from two key factors: time management…" "I wear many hats and have numerous priorities…"	Competing demands	The Clock is Ticking, But You're Stuck
R2. "…balancing teaching deliverables with master's degree requirements became a constant source of confusion."	Balancing teaching requirements	
R3. "…challenged to know what to finish first and the unrealistic goal of finishing the degree as it requires two years to finish the academic requirements."	Difficulty prioritizing tasks and the unrealistic expectation	
R4. "…right? It is difficult to do both tasks, admin and teaching, at the same time." "…and we are not robots, so there are times I did not get enough sleep just to do all things…" "…offices require our submissions abruptly."	Extending work time to complete tasks	
R5. "…encountered pursuing my master's degree and as an instructor is time management because it is very hard to study and to work at the same time…" "it is hard to balance time."	Difficulty in managing time effectively	
R7. "When balancing my work and masters, it is difficult to manage time. When it comes to school activity, sometimes I feel burned-out but at the end of the day I really tried my best to me*et al.,*l the deadlines."	Feeling burnt out despite the best efforts	
FGD 1. "…you can't get the requirements done because you are busy with your workload."	Too much workload	
FGD 2. "It's confusing which one to prioritize because both are important. If one is neglected, the other might be affected. There are also accreditation requirements that need to be complied with, which makes it even more difficult when combined with the thesis."	Difficulty of prioritizing between work tasks and academic requirements	
FGD 3. "It's really difficult to juggle master's degree tasks and work. You have to pass academic requirements to complete the degree and secure a regular item (job position), but I also need to handle my workload, or I might lose my job. It's confusing which one to prioritize."	Struggle to manage both work and studies	
R1. "As a faculty member, there's always another task waiting, making focused work even more challenging."	Constant workload that faculty members face	Under an Avalanche
R2. "…the administrative workload felt excessive, especially for a new faculty member still adjusting to the role."	Feeling of excessive administrative work	
R3. "I am torn between meeting the deadlines for my master's degree and my admin tasks."	Conflict managing deadlines	
R4. "It is draining to be a teacher, a student plus with office designation. …whole day, even at night, I am stressed and drained to meet the requirements."	Draining tasks	
R5. "…there are a lot of requirements to be submitted, and there are a lot of deadlines to meet as an instructor. As a student, there are a lot of requirements to submit."	Overwhelming number of deadlines	
R6. "…we have a lot of tasks like office tasks, not only teaching."	Non-teaching responsibilities faculty members have	
R7. "…my class starts in the morning. In the evening, I have to prepare all my PowerPoint presentations, and if there are tasks that need to be done in my master's, I cannot do them because I cannot remove my focus from my work."	Division of time for across teaching, lesson preparation, master's degree coursework	

R8. "having a designation because there are some assignments that really require your time and extensive preparation for some tasks assigned."	Significant time investments for specific tasks	A Constant Cloud of Uncertainty
R1. "…I was informed about the consequences of not completing my master's within the allotted timeframe. Essentially, my position could be advertised if a qualified applicant applies. The pressure from this potential outcome is significant – maybe around 90% of my overall stress."	Stress on losing job	
R3. "…I am pressured since we have signed the Memorandum of Agreement to finish our master's degree within a year. This creates a loop of pressure to comply with the employment requirements and the demands of graduate school."	Pressured with memorandum of agreement	
R4. "…there is too much pressure we bring every day, and we strive just for our plantilla items not to be posted."	Fear of losing employment	
R6. "Second challenge is finishing my masters degree at the right time." "That is also the reason why I have some doubts as to the status that I shall have after my item will be posted."	Time impacting job security	
R7. "And if I lose my job, how will I continue my masters?"	Losing a job due to unfinished studies	

Theme 1: The Clock is Ticking, But You're Stuck

This emerging theme concluded that SUC instructors wear many hats (R1), juggling teaching responsibilities with the demands of their graduate studies (R2, R3, R4, R5, R7, FGD2, FGD3). This balancing act leads to constant confusion about priorities, with work and academic requirements vying for attention. The pressure is further amplified by unrealistic expectations for degree completion and additional deadlines associated with accreditation. Focus groups highlight the struggle even more, with instructors mentioning conflicting deadlines and the ever-present threat to job security if the degree isn't finished quickly. These combined factors paint a picture of overwhelmed and burnt-out instructors struggling to manage their time effectively while striving to succeed academically and professionally.

SUC instructors pursuing master's degrees face a unique set of challenges. Faculty members, especially new ones, face many tasks with varying deadlines and intensities, such as teaching preparation, research, service activities, and administrative responsibilities (Tam *et al.,* 2018). Studies on faculty time allocation have shown variations based on gender, rank, and family status, impacting the distribution of time for teaching, research, and service activities (Skog & Petterson, 2016). Effective time management is crucial for faculty members to navigate these tasks efficiently, prioritize goals, and avoid feeling overwhelmed or experiencing burnout (Gurrea, 2021; Ju *et al.,* 2021). McClelland's Needs Theory offers a valuable lens to further understand these challenges. Faculty members with a high need for achievement (nAch) might be driven to pursue a master's degree, but the intense workload can exacerbate existing time management issues. Their desire for excellence in coursework can conflict with existing responsibilities, leading to overwhelming feelings.

Theme 2: Under an Avalanche

Instructors described a constant stream of tasks, from teaching to administrative duties (R1, R2, R4, R6). This burden is especially heavy for new faculty members adjusting to their roles (R2). The pressure to meet deadlines for their studies and work creates a constant struggle (R3, R5). Instructors juggle teaching, lesson preparation, and master's coursework, often feeling unable to focus enough on any area (R7). Pursuing specific designations within the faculty can further exacerbate this feeling, as these designations require additional time commitment for assigned tasks (R8).

The overwhelming workload of instructors, particularly in academic settings, is a pervasive issue with detrimental effects on their well-being and job performance (Agyapong *et al.,* 2022; Carroll *et al.,* 2022). Studies highlight that academic staff still face excessive and poorly regulated workloads despite existing workload clauses in Collective Agreements, leading to unhealthy and unreasonable work demands (Kanwal *et al.,* 2023; Febriantina & Aliyyah, 2020). Faculty members with a high need for achievement (nAch) might be particularly susceptible to feeling overloaded. This overload is exacerbated by the unbounded nature of academic roles, work-to-home spillage, and the conflict between teaching and research responsibilities, putting faculty members at risk for burnout and various health issues (Kyung-Nyun, 2019). Additionally, the high workload experienced by teachers in secondary education and universities negatively impacts their quality of life, often resulting in a lack of personal time, stress-related risks, and physical health problems (Collie & Mansfield, 2022).

Theme 3: A Constant Cloud of Uncertainty

Job security emerged as a major concern for SUC

instructors pursuing their master's degrees. Discussions revealed a constant fear of losing their position if they didn't finish the program on time (R1 & R6). This fear stemmed from factors like being informed about job openings if a qualified applicant with a master's degree applied (R1 & R4) and signed agreements with deadlines attached to their employment (R3). The pressure was further amplified by the worry of losing their job security, which could hinder their financial ability to continue their studies (R7). This created a stressful cycle where the pressure to finish the degree quickly for job security could impact their academic performance. Shoes *et al.,*. (2022) found that job insecurity hinders employees from performing effectively. Because they are stressed about losing their jobs, it takes more effort for them to maintain a high level of job performance.

Job security for instructors is a multifaceted issue influenced by various factors. Research in English studies emphasizes the importance of job security for teaching-track faculty, advocating for improved working conditions, compensation, and academic freedom (Lamos, 2016). Faculty members with a high need for achievement (nAch) might be particularly motivated to pursue a master's degree to enhance their job security. Effective probationary periods are crucial for organizations to ensure a good fit between newcomers and the organization, enhancing efficiency and return on investment while neglecting entry-point training programs can lead to a disconnect between workers and their roles (Gordon *et al.,* 2022; Johan, 2022).

Coping mechanisms of SUC Instructors Pursuing Their Master's Degree to Comply with Employment Minimum Requirements

Table 3: Coping mechanisms of SUC instructors pursuing master's degree

Narrative	Core Ideas	Emerging Themes
R1. "I can definitely learn from the journeys of others. Their stories give me insights into how to approach my own studies. I can identify strategies that worked for them and potentially adapt those to fit my situation."	Value of learning from the experiences of others	Strength in Unity, Not Isolation
R2. "I usually ask for help from my classmates, who are always in the planning stage, and none of us could complete the thesis."	Importance of collaboration with classmates	
R3. "I received plenty of help from my colleagues. They are really good at balancing work and giving consultations simultaneously. They also offered free advice on easily accomplishing my tasks as an instructor and with my designation. Their words helped me survive the workload. Because of the help I received from them, I have time to comply with my master's requirements."	Crucial role of colleagues in offering help	
R6. "I also have collaborative learning with my classmates. We have this group chat wherein we can ask some questions and they will provide answers. In this way, they also help me study theorems."	Value of collaborating with classmates through group chats	
R7. "Of course, one of my coping mechanisms is my friends as they give me motivation that I can finish my masters while working. They are my rock when it comes to emotional stability."	Importance of friends as a source of motivation and emotional stability	
R8. "I reach out to other people especially when there is an extensive need for my designation. I reach out to people to interact and simply chit chat with them at the same time ask for assistance whenever I have difficulties in my designation and in the task that was given to me."	Reaching out to others for help	
FGD1. "My co-workers are very supportive. They help a lot with thesis writing and academic requirements. When I ask questions, they really answer."	Receiving concrete help from colleagues	
FGD2. "They are sensitive in a way that they are ready to help with your tasks because they understand the difficulty of handling both academic requirements and workload."	Supportive nature of colleagues	
FGD3. "There are many times when I struggle with academic requirements and ask for their help, and they are always willing to assist. This has been a great help to me despite the challenges I face."	Continuous support received from colleagues	
FGD4. "When I have questions about my thesis, like my thesis title, they help organize it. This was a big help because without them, I would struggle to formulate it."	Value of receiving targeted support from colleagues	

R1. "I prioritize making time for relaxation. This helps me shift gears when I'm overloaded with tasks and prevents me from getting overwhelmed by unfinished work."	Preventative measure to avoid feeling overwhelmed	Pausing to Bloom, Not Wilting Away
R2. "If I am really bombarded with tasks, I rest. I will leave the workplace, walk around to give myself time to rest and then after some hour, I will be back to my desk."	Resting to recover mental clarity	
R3. "I usually read books whenever I find the workplace not healthy anymore. I pause simultaneously, read books, scan some files, and browse social media, trying to find entertaining content like funny memes. I do these all to boost my mood."	Improve mood and provide a mental break	
R4. "There are times that I cry suddenly, and just talking to my husband I feel rested. Hence, we go out camping and do outdoor activities to recharge."	Outdoor activities with family	
FGD1. "But the most important thing is to rest because if you're tired, you need to rest to regain energy."	Rest to regain energy	
FGD2. "We need to rest despite the challenges and busyness. We need to unwind to have the energy to handle tasks and challenges."	Unwind to face challenges	
FGD3. "Rest is what I need. We are bombarded with tasks and academic requirements throughout the weekdays, so I allocate weekends as rest days to recharge."	Rest to recharge	

Theme 4: Strength in Unity, Not Isolation

Instructors rely on various forms of help-seeking behavior to navigate their challenges. This includes learning from the experiences of others (R1) to develop effective study strategies. They find support from classmates through group chats for studying and collaborating on tasks (R2, R6). Many instructors highlight the crucial role of colleagues who offer guidance, advice, and emotional support (R3, FGD1, FGD2, FGD3). Instructors also utilize their networks, reaching out to peers with specific expertise for help with tasks and designations (R8).

Many instructors highlight the crucial role of colleagues who offer guidance, advice, and emotional support (Ibrahim & Nat, 2019). Instructors also utilize their networks, reaching out to peers with specific expertise for help with tasks and designations (Daumiller *et al.,* 2021). Instructors high in the need for affiliation (nAff) may be particularly drawn to the sense of belonging and camaraderie fostered by strong professional networks. For instance, a study on effective learning strategies in higher education highlights that students who engage in group discussions and collaborative tasks tend to develop a better understanding and retention of the material (Qureshi *et al.,* 2021). This method allows students to share diverse perspectives and approaches, leading to a richer learning experience.

Theme 5: Pausing to Bloom, Not Wilting Away

Instructors viewed rest not as leisure but as a tool to prevent burnout and maintain productivity. They described various techniques for incorporating rest, like prioritizing relaxation time to shift gears and avoid feeling overwhelmed by work (R1, R4). Taking short breaks by leaving the workplace and walking around was another strategy to clear the mind and return refreshed (R2). For others, rest involved engaging in activities that boosted their mood, such as reading or browsing for entertainment (R3). The focus group discussions echoed these sentiments, highlighting the need to prioritize rest despite workload demands (FGD1, FGD2). Allocating dedicated rest periods, like weekends, was seen as crucial for recharging energy to handle academic and work challenges (FGD3).

Sonnentag *et al.,*. (2022) found that engaging in specific activities during breaks, like leisure pursuits, socializing, or physical exercise, led to higher levels of positive emotions and more positive behavior at work, as supported by the study of Sonnentag, S., & Fritz, C. (2015) on the importance of non–working time as a crucial aspect of recovery for employees as they face job stress. Accordingly, this is a helpful tool for employees to relax and have time to recover from stressful experiences. This suggests that taking breaks strategically and participating in such activities can help employees better handle work-related stress and maintain a positive emotional state while on the job (Spagnol, 2023). Building a strong support network is crucial for SUC instructors. Those high in the need for power (nPow) might find leisure pursuits or socializing helpful for emotional regulation, allowing them to return to work feeling more in control.

Insights of SUC Instructors Pursuing Their Master's Degree to Comply with Employment Minimum Requirements

Table 4: Insights of SUC instructors pursuing master's degree

Narrative	Core Ideas	Emerging Themes
R3. "It would also be best to offer scholarships, especially for struggling instructors. It is not a secret that the expenses required to finish a master's degree are quite expensive."	Scholarships as a form of financial aid	Bridging the Gap Between Potential and Barriers
R4. "The expenses expected in graduate school is not a secret, and helping us through financial support can go a long way." "The institution is quite well generous to those who are working on their second doctorate degrees… How about us pursuing masters… they can give us financial support, right?"	Financial aid from the institution	
R6. "…it would be better for the institution to curate a support for graduate students. I understand that it is the minimum requirement and that there are a lot of graduate students who are experiencing financial difficulty. So, a scholarship from the institution or something like than can really help."	Address financial challenges	
FGD1. "Financial support from the institution is crucial, even with terms and conditions like return of service. It would help us a lot financially."	Importance of financial aid	
FGD2. "Institutional support would greatly help us achieve our master's degrees. Financial support, like scholarships, would be beneficial."	Scholarships as a form of financial support	
FGD4. "They already help financially through our salaries, but sometimes it's not enough."	Salary insufficient to cover expenses	

Theme 6: Bridging the Gap between Potential and Barriers

SUC instructors acknowledged their existing salaries (FGD4) but highlighted the significant financial burden associated with graduate studies (R3, R6). Scholarships or similar financial aid programs were seen as crucial support (R3, FGD1, FGD2). The instructors were willing to accept conditions attached to such support, like the return of service agreements (FGD1), acknowledging the potential benefits of such programs in alleviating their financial strain. Moreover, scholarships and financial aid programs are viewed as crucial forms of support by SUC instructors (R3, R4, FGD1, FGD2).

The financial strain of pursuing graduate studies is a significant concern among SUC instructors. Research found that graduate students often face financial challenges, impacting their overall well-being and academic success (Soria & Horgos, 2017). However, programs can alleviate the financial burden associated with graduate studies, enabling instructors to focus more on their academic pursuits and reducing stress related to financial worries (Soria & Horgos, 2017). Instructors high in the need for achievement (nAch) might be particularly motivated to pursue a master's degree despite the financial burden. A study by Abarca and Santos (2018) highlighted the struggles of teachers pursuing their advanced degrees. One of the challenges they face is financial strain, and they need support from institutions like scholarships and financial assistance.

Essence of Pursuing a Master's Degree

Table 5: Essence for SUC instructors to pursue a master's degree

Narrative	Core Ideas	Emerging Themes
R1. "Confidence… I need to be more knowledgeable in the class."	Being more knowledgeable	Knowledge as power
R4. "It helps me obtain more knowledge and understanding especially when I am in the academe."	Obtain more knowledge	
R6. "It would help me feel confident whenever I teach my students, because I am not just a bachelor's degree holder but also one step higher" "additional learning and achievement as a teacher."	Feel confident with knowledge acquired	
R7. "It would be nice if I gained more knowledge than them in terms of educational status as this will empower us."	Being empowered with knowledge	
FGD2. "One important reason for my studies now is that I've learned a lot that is a great help to my career as a teacher."	Learnings as aid to career	
FGD3. "Not to brag, but I can see that I'm growing in my career by studying for my master's. I've learned many things that I hadn't encountered in my undergraduate studies, so it's a big help to my career."	Growing in learning	

R1. "I really want to be permanent in my employment."	Permanent as main motivator	Path to Permanence
R3. "improving the process of the designated office under my watch, I don't want to be selfish or something, but I want to take advantage of my hard work by getting the permanent position."	Reaping the word through permanence	
R4. "as a family-oriented woman, I need this job security to feed my family, and one way to assure the flow of finances is to secure a permanent position."	Job security assures finances	
R6. "for my job, since it is the minimum requirement for me to be permanent in this job, then I must say, completing my master's degree is a must."	Meeting job requirement	
FGD1. "Of course, first and foremost, I need to finish my master's so that I can become permanent and not have to worry anymore."	Free from worry	
FGD3. "The goal and motivation is really to finish so that my position will no longer be posted. I can get a permanent plantilla item."		
FGD 4. "Of course, it's really important to finish so that the item will truly be mine, and it won't be posted or replaced."		

Theme 7: Knowledge as Power

Throughout their academic experiences, SUC instructors highlight the importance of knowledge in fostering confidence. (R1) The instructor acknowledges the need for more knowledge to feel confident in the classroom. Similarly, the instructor (R4) emphasizes how a master's degree provides a crucial boost in knowledge and understanding, which is essential for thriving within the academic environment. (R6) Builds on this by directly linking increased knowledge to a feeling of confidence while teaching. Instructors view it as additional learning and achievement, empowering them in the classroom (R7, FGD2, & FGD3). Conclusively, SUC instructors see gaining more knowledge as empowerment, potentially leading to a stronger position within the educational system.

Teachers pursuing a master's degree face challenges related to knowledge and skill development (Sarigoz, 2022; Billet, 2022; Journell & Tolbert, 2016). This pursuit might be driven by a need for achievement (nAch) in McClelland's theory. However, the challenges can be significant. For instance, instructors seeking to enhance their subject matter expertise (Stotko *et al.*, 2005, as cited by Journell & Tolbert, 2016) might be motivated by this need for achievement yet struggle to keep up with the ever-evolving educational landscape. Effective programs that address both knowledge gaps and practical skills like critical thinking and technology integration (Sadeghi *et al.*, 2021; Niess & Gillow-Wiles, 2016) can ultimately help instructors achieve their academic goals and become more effective educators (Daumiller *et al.*, 2019).

Theme 8: Path to Permanence

The pursuit of a master's degree among SUC instructors is heavily influenced by the desire for job security, as evidenced by their experiences. Statements like "I really want to be permanent in my employment" (R1) and "need to finish my master's so I can become permanent" (FGD1) directly express the anxiety of impermanent positions and the longing for stability. This motivation extends beyond personal well-being, as in statements like "improving the process... I want to take advantage of my hard work by getting the permanent position" (R3). Here, the instructor connects job security with the ability to make a lasting impact on their role. Furthermore, comments like "as a family-oriented woman, I need this job security to feed my family" (R4) highlight the critical role a permanent position plays in financial stability and family support. Interestingly, statement (R6) offers a complementary perspective. It acknowledges the master's degree as an external requirement enforced by the institution to achieve permanency.

Job security for college teachers, particularly those on teaching tracks, is a complex issue with multifaceted benefits. Research by Lamos (2016) highlights the importance of job security in promoting fair working conditions and academic freedom, which can be particularly motivating for instructors who are high in McClelland's need for achievement (nAch). Studies by Colak and Altinkurt (2022) further emphasize the negative impact of job insecurity on teachers' well-being. Knowing they have a permanent position (achieved through tenure) can alleviate these anxieties and allow instructors to focus on their teaching and research with less stress. While tenure systems face criticisms (Zhang & Horta, 2023), the sense of security they provide aligns with the needs of many instructors and ultimately contributes to a more supportive academic environment (Shoss *et al.*, 2022).

CONCLUSION

SUC instructors pursuing graduate degrees face many challenges, including workload overload, job security concerns, and financial strain. Individual needs for achievement, affiliation, or power can exacerbate these. However, effective interventions can be designed to address these challenges. Tailored programs offering time management strategies, fostering support networks, and providing financial aid can alleviate stress and promote well-being. Additionally, graduate programs that bridge

knowledge gaps while equipping instructors with practical skills can empower them to succeed as academics and educators. Ultimately, institutions can cultivate a more qualified and thriving faculty by creating a supportive environment that addresses both the challenges and needs of SUC instructors.

This study lays the groundwork for future research that can comprehensively explore the experiences faced by SUC instructors pursuing graduate degrees. Quantitative data on workload, stress, and job security concerns can be gathered through surveys. Additionally, research based on McClelland's Needs Theory could identify instructors' specific needs. The effectiveness of counseling strategies like time management or support groups needs to be evaluated to determine the most helpful interventions. Longitudinal studies tracking instructors' careers can reveal the long-term impact of graduate degrees. Comparative studies across universities can identify best practices regarding financial aid, workload expectations, and tenure requirements. Finally, research on the potential impact of instructor well-being on student learning outcomes can inform strategies for supporting instructors and students for a more positive learning environment.

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