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Studying for Whom? Family Reciprocity in First-Year Undergraduates' Accounts of Education

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ABSTRACT

In higher institutions of learning, there is the notion of individual responsibility in undertaking education, but in many societies, students do not undertake studies for themselves, rather, they pursue education for their families. It is unclear how first-year university students in the Philippines connect their rationale for studying with their families. The primary research question was how undergraduate first year students connected their reasons for studying to family members. The analysis of five open-ended prompt responses was carried out through thematic analysis of responses provided by 33 undergraduate students at two state universities in transcribed interviews. Family was mentioned in responses to all five prompts. Five sub-themes emerged: studying as repayment of parents' sacrifice; education as a way to serve family and others; motivation and pressure side by side; parents who do not pressure but expect completion; and family in the alternative routes of free tuition and overseas work. The majority of students mentioned studying as repaying their family. Some mentioned pressure along with motivation, while two mentioned that although their parents do not put pressure on them, they link their studies to family. We suggest the reciprocal study framework where the sacrifice of parents is perceived as something to be repaid through effort and completion, and where pressure is part of the same path, something to be transformed into effort. Counselors might use the family expectations as an asset while being aware of the stress. The findings represent students' perceptions based on brief interview responses and are not generalizable.

INTRODUCTION

Universities tend to depict studying as an individual effort (Stephens *et al.*, 2012), however, UNESCO reported 264 million students registered in universities globally in 2023, twice as many as twenty years ago (UNESCO, 2025). Registration statistics do not reveal anything about the reasons for enrollment; in many cases, they are not individual at all.

Evidence from different countries shows that students are motivated by family considerations when studying. In a survey of more than 800 American adolescents, those from Asian and Latin American families reported stronger obligations to help, respect, and support their families, generally linked to higher academic motivation but not higher grades (Fuligni *et al.*, 1999). First-generation U.S. university students gave reasons for attending college that were more interdependent than the independence their universities stressed, a mismatch associated with lower grades (Stephens *et al.*, 2012). In 155 first-year students at one U.S. university, collectivistic motives predicted more clashes between family and academic obligations (Vasquez-Salgado *et al.*, 2021). The family tie can lift motivation and strain well-being at once, and the studies above, being scale-based, say little about how students themselves put that tie into words.

Family orientation is not simply beneficial, however. Among 1,476 Chinese primary school students, believing in repaying and caring for parents (reciprocal filial piety) was associated with more enjoyment of mathematics and less procrastination, while believing in obeying parents and upholding family honor (authoritarian filial piety) was associated with more anxiety and more procrastination (Guo *et al.*, 2023). Because that study was cross-sectional and used young children, it cannot show how older students describe the same bond, but it suggests that how a family tie is understood may matter as much as whether it exists.

The Philippines provides an ideal context for this question. Bernardo (2003) raised the question of whether Filipino youth really value education, finding that they endorse the abstract more than the practical value of education. Family has been characterized as the context that provides meaning for Filipino students (Reyes & Galang, 2009), and Filipino undergraduates who were primed with family obligation performed better on researcher-created assessments of course content than did those primed with mastery, performance, or neither goals (Retuya *et al.*, 2017). Utang na loob, the local sense of a debt of gratitude that has no definite end to its repayment, is one possible interpretation of this force, which has been described as morally ambivalent, both positive and negative (Mabaquiao & Piamonte, 2024). In a survey of 557 Filipino college students, it correlated with both perceived parental academic pressure and anxiety, although direction cannot be

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shown (Dizon *et al.*, 2025). Qualitative work found students framing it mainly as giving back to parents (Casiño *et al.*, 2025), young adults supported by non-biological parents feeling a duty to repay that often became pressure (Abogadie *et al.*, 2025), and working eldest children describing obligations shaped by cultural expectations alongside hope of a better future for the family (Lasanas *et al.*, 2024). Studies of perfectionism (Tan, 2022) and adjustment (Mirote, 2026) noted a duty to repay parents' sacrifices but did not ask what education is for.

There are three gaps. Firstly, the Philippine studies of family and studying have mostly been experimental or survey-based (Dizon *et al.*, 2025; Retuya *et al.*, 2017). Secondly, the qualitative studies we identified have considered other issues and touched upon the family as an ancillary finding (Mirote, 2026; Tan, 2022), or were focused on utang na loob as the central theme (Abogadie *et al.*, 2025; Casiño *et al.*, 2025). Thirdly, they pay little attention to how freshmen define the purpose of education and involve family in this definition. This is crucial for counselors and educators as they will have to choose between treating family expectations as a resource and a burden to be alleviated.

This paper therefore reports a secondary analysis of archived qualitative data: first-year undergraduates' transcribed interview responses to five open-ended prompts on education, college, grades, family, and contemporary routes to success. Its central question is: how do first-year undergraduates connect their reasons for studying to their families? Three guiding questions organize the analysis: what do students say they give or owe to family through studying; does the family connection appear as motivation, as pressure, or as both; and does it appear when family is not asked about? Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we answer these and propose a post-research framework that explains the answer (section 4.1). The same responses were used in a broader report of how these students value education (Martinez & Cabias, 2026); this paper reports a separate analysis centered on family.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Design: Secondary Analysis of Archived Qualitative Data

This is an exploratory qualitative study of transcribed interview responses, analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The 33 transcribed interview responses are those used in an earlier report on how first-year students value education (Martinez & Cabias, 2026), which asked whether students see education as valuable in the abstract, in practice, or both. The original study used Bernardo's (2003) distinction to shape the prompts; students answered five open-ended prompts face-to-face in interviews, in the second semester of the 2025–2026 academic year, and the responses were transcribed. A constructivist and reflexive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was taken: the themes emerge during interpretation of the answers by the authors, not discovered in the answers themselves.

The reason for secondary analysis: the family emerged in more prompts than the one where it was asked directly, making it possible to compare the answers both to prompted and unprompted questions. The difference from previous work: one of the themes in that study's five, studying as repayment, found that most of the students wanted to give something back to their families, while a few felt pressure on top of motivation (Martinez & Cabias, 2026). This paper builds on that: it examines family in five prompts total, produces five sub-themes of its own, including family in stories of tuition and work abroad and uses different quotations. Rows 1 and 4 of Table 2 were also reported there; the note to Table 2 explains the differences.

Participants and Recruitment

Thirty-three first-year undergraduates from two state universities in northern Luzon, Philippines, took part in the study. They were enrolled in four degree programs, which are not named to protect participants' anonymity. Participants were selected through purposive sampling with two inclusion criteria: current enrolment as a first-year undergraduate in the second semester of the 2025–2026 academic year, and willingness to answer the five prompts individually in a face-to-face interview. First-year students were chosen deliberately, where entry into university is the point at which students first have to explain why they are enrolled, and family expectations about finishing a degree are likely to be most visible then. Including two universities meant that the responses did not come from a single campus. Because both are state universities, where tuition is free under Republic Act No. 10931, all participants were studying under the free-tuition policy that prompt 5 asks about, those students who met the criteria were invited in person by members of the research team, who explained the purpose of the study, and those who agreed gave written consent before the interview. The archive fixed the sample size, and we do not claim saturation. Participant codes run from S01 to S34; code S30 was not used because no response set was recorded under it. No demographic data were collected in the original study (see section 2.8). Table 1 describes the sample.

Data collection. Each student was interviewed individually and face-to-face by a member of the research team on campus during the second semester of the 2025–2026 academic year, where the interviewer asked the five prompts in the order shown in section 2.3, and students answered in English, Filipino, Ilocano, or a mix of these. Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Follow-up probes were kept to a minimum so that every student answered the same five prompts in the same way; even so, many answers to individual prompts were brief. Responses were captured word for word and transcribed verbatim by the researchers.

Table 1: Sample description

Characteristic	Category	n
Mode of participation	Responded individually	33
Language of response	English	17
	Filipino	10
	Taglish	3
	Ilocano mixed with English or Taglish	3
Total analyzed		33

Prompts

Students answered five interview prompts: (1) "What does education mean to you? Is it important?"; (2) "Does finishing college needed to succeed? Give examples of people who succeeded without it"; (3) "Do high grades or honors matter for getting a good job? Why?"; (4) "How family expectations and responsibilities shape why you study"; and (5) "How free tuition, social media, online selling, and overseas work affect your views about education?" Wording is as given, with one repeated word removed. The first three prompts follow the structure of Bernardo's (2003) study of general importance, the pragmatic value of college, and the pragmatic value of achievement. Prompts 4 and 5 extend it to family reasons and present-day conditions.

Data Preparation

The corpus is 33 response sets, each answering five prompts (see 2.2 on codes). The researchers transcribed the interviews verbatim, and quotations were checked against the transcripts. Answers were short. Responses were analyzed in the language given; the authors, who are bilingual in the languages used, translated the Filipino and Ilocano excerpts. To check accuracy, the researchers checked every translated excerpt against the original wording; differences were resolved by discussion, and the agreed wording is the one reported. Words with no exact English equivalent (e.g., "sakripisyo" and "maiahon") are kept in the original next to the translation. Quotations are verbatim, with translations in brackets; capitals were normalized, and an ellipsis marks omitted or overwritten words. No qualitative data analysis software (e.g., NVivo or ATLAS.ti) was used because coding was done manually by the authors, prompt by prompt for each student. Apart from the consistency check described in section 2.6, no computer program generated codes or sub-themes.

Analysis

We followed the phases of Braun and Clarke (2006); the earlier report's themes were a starting point, not a coding frame.

1. **Familiarization.** The transcribed responses were read closely, prompt by prompt.

2. **Coding.** Both researchers coded all responses themselves and agreed on the codes through discussion; no codes were generated by software. Passages about family, parents, relatives, or loved ones were coded wherever they appeared in the five prompts, thus, codes came from the responses; utang na loob (Hollnsteiner, 1961; Kaut, 1961; Mabaquiao & Piamonte, 2024) and Bernardo's (2003) abstract and pragmatic value sharpened what to look for but were not a coding frame.

3. **Sub-themes.** Codes were compared across prompts and grouped into candidate sub-themes.

4. **Reviewing.** Candidates were checked against the responses. A sub-theme that rested on one prompt was kept only if it recurred elsewhere or answered the central question directly. Responses that did not fit, such as students who did not mention family, were kept and reported.

5. **Defining.** Each sub-theme received a one-line definition tied to the central question (the opening of each subsection of section 3).

6. **Counting and reporting.** A student was counted once per idea within a prompt. "Most", "some" and "a few" describe how many students who answered a prompt expressed an idea; counts in Table 2 are descriptive, not evidence of prevalence. Denominators differ because some prompts were unanswered or too uncertain to code. Quotations are verbatim and none repeats (Martinez & Cabias, 2026).

7. **Framework.** Once the sub-themes were final, we asked what relation among them best explained the answer to the central question. The framework in section 4.1 is our untested interpretation of these 33 responses. The sub-themes were developed by the researchers first. Only after they were final were the responses run through an AI tool (see Use of AI) to compare its grouping with ours. Differences were checked against the responses, and the researchers made every final decision; the AI output served as a comparison, not as a source of codes or sub-themes.

How the sub-themes were formed. Each sub-theme groups codes that share one idea about how studying relates to family. *Studying as repayment* (3.1) grouped the codes repaying, parents' sacrifice, lifting the family out of hardship, and not wasting parents' effort. *Education as a way to serve family and others* (3.2) grouped prompt-1 codes, given before family was mentioned: helping family someday, fulfilling parents' dreams, and helping the community. *Motivation and pressure side by side* (3.3) grouped answers in which pressure and motivation were named together, with the related code of studying for one's own future as well. *Parents who do not pressure but expect completion* (3.4) was formed from cases that went against the pressure codes; it was kept because it answered the

central question directly. *Family in the alternative routes* (3.5) grouped prompt-5 codes on overseas work as family income, free tuition as relief for parents, and the cost of distance from family.

Key terms. Reciprocity means a student's statement that studying is a return for what family has given. The repayment of utang na loob is exemplified by terms like "repay," "masuklian," and "ibalik." Pressure refers to any words from the student about being pressured, strained, or stressed owing to familial expectations and not solely due to academic or financial stress. The phrase utang na loob refers to an obligation of gratitude without any set deadline for repayment (Hollnsteiner, 1961; Kaut, 1961; Mabaquiao & Piamonte, 2024).

An example of the analytic trail. One student answered prompt 4 with "gusto kong masuklian ang sakripisyo nila gusto kong makatapos para maiahon ko sila sa kahirapan" [I want to repay their sacrifice; I want to finish so I can lift them out of poverty] (S32). We coded it first as repayment, parents' sacrifice, and lifting the family out of hardship as it contributed to the sub-theme of studying as repayment (3.1). Our reading that repayment can carry a concrete goal and not only gratitude comes from several such cases together; the student did not say it.

Trustworthiness

We organized trustworthiness around the four criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985), as applied to thematic analysis by Nowell *et al.* (2017).

Credibility. Each sub-theme was traced to the transcribed responses, and translated excerpts were compared with the source text. As a consistency check, 15 prompt-4 responses were coded again without access to the first codes, using the same four code definitions. This second pass was made by an AI model (Claude); the researchers then checked its codes against the responses. Percent agreement ranged from 80% to 100% across the four codes; the differences were about whether studying "for family", without a stated return, counted as giving back or helping family. The codes for give-back themes were coded using one criterion: giving back or helping family was coded if prompt 4 contained a reference to returning or benefiting a member of the family (repaying, helping, uplifting, or studying "for" family), and not when family only inspired, supported, or demanded something from the student. All codes that had been based on other prompts were eliminated, affecting three give-back codes and two proud codes (indicated by the numbers in Table 2). The process of our coding is closest to the reflexive thematic analysis, whereby consensus among the coders is not considered to be the criterion of the study's quality (Braun & Clarke, 2021); the pass assures us of uniformity in applying the definitions.

Transferability. We describe the sample, languages, and prompts (sections 2.2 and 2.3, Table 1) so readers can judge fit to other settings; no demographic data were collected.

Dependability. The code definitions, the decision rule, and the changes it caused are reported so the analysis can be followed from the transcripts to Table 2.

Confirmability. Codes stayed close to students' wording, and the Discussion separates what students reported, what we interpret, and what earlier work suggests. The authors did not know the participants; our positions are described in the reflexivity statement.

Reflexivity. Both authors are Filipino educators who share the participants' cultural background and speak the languages they used; one is a registered guidance counselor and counselor educator, and the other teaches in a professional degree program. Neither author taught the participating students. We came to the data with a prior view, formed in counseling and teaching work, that Filipino families are mainly a source of support for students. This view could have made repayment and gratitude easier for us to notice than strain, and it may have shaped two analytic choices: reading pressure that students turned into effort as part of the same path (3.3), and framing family expectations as a resource in the implications. To limit this, we (a) searched the responses for cases that went against our expectation, such as students who did not mention family or whose pressure did not lead to effort, and reported them; (b) separated what students said from our interpretations in the Discussion; (c) discussed each candidate sub-theme between the two authors until we agreed on its definition; and (d) documented our coding decisions, including the decision rule and the changes it caused (see Credibility).

Use of AI. A large language model (Claude, Anthropic) was used (1) to make the second coding pass of 15 prompt-4 responses described in section 2.6, whose codes the researchers then checked against the responses, (2) after the researchers had developed the sub-themes, to group the same responses independently so that its grouping could be compared with the researchers' sub-themes, and (3) to assist in language editing of the manuscript. The authors reviewed all AI output for consistency, made the final analytic decisions, and take full responsibility for the content. The tool is not an author.

Ethical Considerations

The original study was reviewed and approved by Mariano Marcos State University before data collection began and covered the present secondary analysis of the archived interview responses, so no further approval was sought. Thirty-three first-year undergraduates from two state universities in the Philippines took part in individual, face-to-face interviews. Participation was voluntary, before each interview, the researchers explained the purpose of the study, and each student gave written informed consent, including permission for their anonymized responses to be published. Students were informed that they could withdraw at any time without penalty, and since the study posed minimal risk because the prompts asked about education and family expectations rather than distressing personal experiences.

To protect confidentiality, students' names were replaced

with participant codes (S01–S34), the participating universities and degree programs were not named, and no identifying details, such as birth order, were quoted. The transcripts were stored in a password-protected drive accessible only to the research team, and all personal information was handled in accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173). Moreover, the study received no external funding, no conflicts of interest for the authors, and all findings were reported accurately, without fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism, and the use of an AI tool for comparison and language editing was disclosed (see Use of AI).

Constraints of Using Archived Data

Reusing archived responses brought four problems, which we handled as follows. First, the prompts were written for a study of how students value education, not for a study of family, so only prompt 4 asked about family directly, then we treated this as an advantage for one question (whether family appears when it is not asked about) and as a limit for another (how strongly pressure is felt), and we report counts by prompt. Second, some information was missing because not every student answered every prompt, and some answers were too uncertain to code, so denominators differ (32 for prompt 1, 31 for prompt 4, and 23 for prompt 5; Table 2); no demographic data were collected, and code S30 was not used. We did not fill in missing answers and report each count against the number of students who answered that prompt. Third, short answers and the lack of follow-up probes meant that we could not ask students to explain what they said, so interpretations were kept close to their wording and marked as ours. Fourth, the same responses informed an earlier report (Martinez & Cabias, 2026) so to keep the two analyses distinct, we coded all five prompts afresh for family, used no quotation from the earlier report, and explain in the note to Table 2 where counts differ and why.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Family came out in all five prompts provided by the students, although in different ways. Family was most explicit in prompt 4, when the majority of the students mentioned the sacrifice of their parents as the motivation for them to continue studying, and it also emerged without prompting in prompt 1 and less frequently in prompt 5.

Studying as repayment

This theme concerns repayments – students' claims that education pays something back to the parents because of what they sacrificed.

Most students who talked about their families viewed their education as a means of paying something back. This theme was expressed through the idea of repayments, return, and payback, which was associated mainly with the sacrifice of the parents. Some of the students saw repayment as freeing the family from suffering. For others, it meant showing parents that their effort had not been wasted.

"*gusto kong masuklian ang sakripisyo nila gusto kong makatapos para maiahon ko sila sa kahirapan"* [I want to repay their sacrifice; I want to finish so I can lift them out of poverty] (S32, prompt 4)

"*maiahon ang pamilya at masuklian ang kanilang mga sakripisyo*" [lift the family up and repay their sacrifices] (S15, prompt 4)

"i want to give them a better future and repay their sacrifices someday" (S14, prompt 4)

"*so that the day we can help them and give back all the kindness and sacrifices they have shared for us*" (S20, prompt 4)

"*I wanted to repay them back because I want them to see where their money went*" (S26, prompt 4)

Sacrifice also worked as fuel rather than as debt. Several students said that seeing what their parents gave up made them want to continue when school was hard.

"*Their sacrifices and expectation motivate me to study harder."* (S17, prompt 4)

Education as a Way to Serve Family and Others

This theme is about what students said education means, before family was asked about.

The same orientation appeared before the family prompt was reached. Asked what education means, a good number of students already framed it as a way to help their family "someday", and a few widened this to loved ones or to their parents' own dreams. One student pointed to the community instead, which suggests that the family framing was common but not universal.

"*I want to finish my education, find a good job, and help my family someday."* (S33, prompt 1)

"*Through education, I can have more opportunities to reach my dreams and help my family someday."* (S13, prompt 1)

"*gagawin ko ang lahat ng aking kakayahan para matupad ang pangarap ng aking magulang para sa kanila at para sa aking sarili"* [I will do all I can to fulfil my parents' dreams, for them and for myself] (S11, prompt 1)

"*ibalik ang mga sakripisyong ginawa … aking mga magulang sa aking pag-aaral"* [return the sacrifices my parents made for my studies] (S28, prompt 1)

"*Through education, we can improve our lives and help our communities thrive.*" (S19, prompt 1)

Motivation and Pressure Side by Side

This theme is about students who named expectation and strain together.

A few students said outright that family expectations were both a push and a strain. They did not describe pressure as the opposite of motivation. In each of these accounts the student also named sacrifice or repayment, and the pressure was something to be turned into effort.

"Sometimes, I feel pressured, but their love gives me strength to keep going" (S10, prompt 4)

"Instead of feeling heavily pressed, I used their love and hard work as fuel to keep moving forward." (S19, prompt 4)

"*ang mga expectations nila ay nagiging motivation ko para magsikap, pero may mga times din na nakararamdam ako ng pressure*" [their expectations become my motivation to strive, but there are times I feel pressure] (S21, prompt 4)
A separate strand described studying as not only for the family: the student's own future was named alongside.
"*hindi lang naman para sa kanila kundi para rin sa ating future"* [not only for them but also for our future] (S24, prompt 4)
"*Im doing this for my future too*" (S23, prompt 4)
Some students also spoke about stress that came from schoolwork and money, not from family expectations. These accounts were not coded as family pressure.

Parents Who do not Pressure but Expect Completion
This theme revolves around students who stated that their parents do not pressure them. This theme questions whether the family relationship persists in the absence of pressure.
Two students have stated that their parents do not pressure them, yet they still make the connection between their education and family. For one student, the support was accompanied by only one condition, which was completion. For another student, the struggle of the family provided the motivation in the absence of pressure. Another student, answering in Ilocano, did not use the term pressure but stated that the parents did not demand much from them.
"*Ang aking mga magulang ay hindi nila ako prine-pressure sa aking pag-aaral, sinusuporta nila kung ano lang ang kaya ko, basta makapagtapos ako sa pag-aaral.*" [My parents do not pressure me about my studies; they support whatever I can, as long as I finish.] (S28, prompt 4)
"*I see how my family struggle … even though they dont pressure me, I want that future of us to be much better.*" (S27, prompt 4)
"*haan met ag ex-expect daggiti nagannak ko ti [n]angato okay kanyada tay makaturpos kam nga agkabsat. Makita da nga ada nagbanagan amin a sakripisyo da.*" [My parents do not expect much; it is fine with them that we siblings finish. They see that all their sacrifices have borne results.] (S11, prompt

Family in the Alternative Routes
This theme is about prompt 5, free tuition and overseas work. It shows whether family also appears in how students read present-day routes to success.

Table 2: Family-related ideas among students who answered each prompt

Idea	Prompt	Students answering	Students expressing
Give back or help family	4	31	27
Parents' sacrifice named	4	31	19
Proud, or not wasting parents' effort	4	31	9
Pressure described alongside motivation	4	31	7
Help family or others through education	1	32	14
Overseas work addressed	5	23	15
Cost of distance from family named	5	23	2

Note: A student is counted once per idea within a prompt. Students could express more than one idea. Row 6 repeats a count reported in Martinez and Cabias (2026), where rows 1 and 4 were also reported, as 28 and 7 of 30. Here one response given in Ilocano is included after translation (31 students answering), and three give-back codes were revised against the prompt-4 text alone (27 students in row 1). The other rows are reported here for the first time.

In prompt 5, family appeared mostly as the reason people work abroad or as the group relieved when tuition is free. Overseas work was read as income for the family, and several students linked free tuition to what their parents would otherwise have to carry. The cost of being far from family was mentioned by only a few.
"*Overseas work also shows me how far people will go to support their family.*" (S10, prompt 5)
"*hindi na kailangang problemahin ng pamilya ko ang malaking gastos*" [my family no longer has to worry about the big expenses] (S32, prompt 5)
"*nababawasan ang problema ng mga magulang na nagpapaaral"* [the problem of parents who pay for schooling is reduced] (S24, prompt 5)
Not every student linked these routes to family. Some used them to argue that formal schooling is only one path, and others spoke about online selling or social media without mentioning family at all.

Discussion

Answer to the Central Question and Post-Research Framework

This study asked how first-year undergraduates connect their reasons for studying to their families. In all 33 responses to the interview, the same pattern held—family was the entity owed the effort, the one whose life would benefit from obtaining the degree. In response to prompt 4, out of 31 who replied, 27 mentioned that studying was giving something back to family and 19 talked about their parent's sacrifices (3.1). This connection was not limited to the family question alone for among those answering prompt 1, out of 32 respondents, 14 mentioned the reason for education as being able to help their family or others (3.2), and the role of family influenced even their understanding of free education and foreign employment (3.5). Seven students mentioned pressure alongside motivation, and in each of these accounts the pressure was something to turn into effort (3.3), and two students

said their parents did not pressure them and still tied their studies to family (3.4).

We propose a framework, built after the analysis, to show how these answers fit together (Figure 1). First, parents' sacrifice is noticed and named, and it is the starting point of most accounts. Second, the sacrifice is read as calling for a return, and the repeated "someday" ("balang araw") suggests a return without a fixed end. Third, the return is paid in the student's own effort and in finishing, so the degree becomes the form repayment takes. Fourth, the hoped-for payoff is the family lifted up and the sacrifice not wasted. Sacrifice also works as fuel for effort, and pressure, where students named it, joins the same path as something to turn into effort and not as a reason to stop, and three conditions mark its edges (Figure 1).

The framework makes two claims that other data could challenge. First, the main link between family and studying is a return owed, not obedience. Second, pressure and motivation share a path, and for tudents whose family pressure ended their effort, or whose studies had no family reference, would limit both claims.

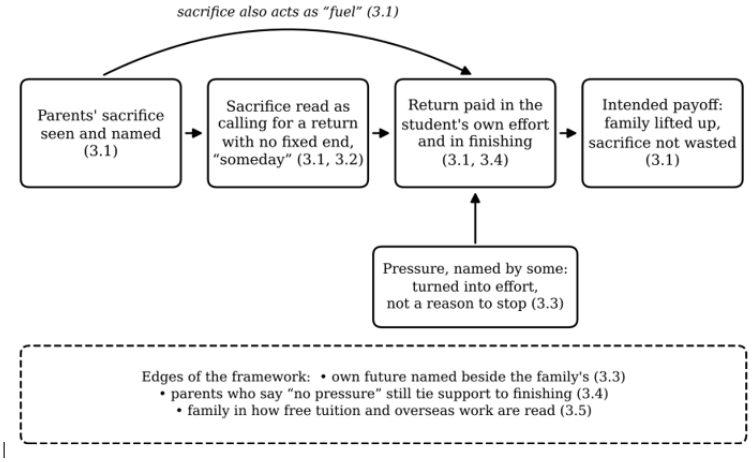

Figure 1: Reciprocal-study framework: how first-year students in this study connect studying to family. Numbers refer to sections of the Findings. This is the authors' interpretation of 33 responses and has not been tested.

Interpretation of the Results

Here we separate what students reported, what we interpret, and what earlier work suggests; the interpretations are open to challenge and none is tested.

What was expected. That students would speak of repaying their parents' sacrifice was the least surprising result. Qualitative work on perfectionism (Tan, 2022), adjustment (Mirote, 2026), and utang na loob (Abogadie *et al.*, 2025; Casiño *et al.*, 2025) had already noted a duty to repay, and prompt 4 asked directly about family. What the results add is how the repayment is structured, which the framework in section 4.1 sets out.

What was less expected. Three results did not follow directly from the earlier work. First, family appeared in answers to a question that did not mention it: nearly half of those answering prompt 1 (14 of 32) tied education to helping family or others, and the repeated "someday" suggests that the tie is part of what education means to these students and not only a reply to being asked about family. Second, pressure was named by few (7 of 31). A survey of Filipino college students linked utang na loob to both perceived parental academic pressure and anxiety (Dizon *et al.*, 2025); our data neither confirm nor contradict that link, because pressure language was rare and prompt 4 asked about "expectations and responsibilities", not about pressure. Third, students who denied pressure still tied their studies to family (3.4), so the family link did not depend on felt pressure.

What the pattern means. When considered together, the findings indicate the nature of the dependencies between the components. If the reward comes through exertion and completion, then a parent's expectation and a student's personal motivation align, and there is no point in distinguishing them: "ang mga expectations nila ay nagiging motivation ko" [their expectations become my motivation] (S21, prompt 4). This could be the reason why pressure and motivation emerged together and did not represent opposite categories, and why it was possible for a student to say that he had no pressure at all but viewed studying as a form of paying back to parents. The student whose parents "sinusuporta nila kung ano lang ang kaya ko, basta makapagtapos ako" [support whatever I can, as long as I finish] (S28, prompt 4) names a single condition, and that condition is the form the return takes. This is our interpretation; the responses show what students said, not why they said it.

What this angle adds. Much of the work reviewed above measures family with scales of obligation, filial piety, or guilt and relates it to motivation or grades (Covarrubias *et al.*, 2020; Fuligni *et al.*, 1999; Stephens *et al.*, 2012; Vasquez-Salgado *et al.*, 2021; Zhou *et al.*, 2020). We began instead from what students said education is for, and found family there before it was asked about. Three differences follow. First, reciprocity here is a debt in time: "someday" places the return in the future and makes studying the instalment paid now, so effort is the form repayment takes and not a reaction to a demand. Second, pressure and motivation did not sit at opposite ends; students who

named pressure described it as a reason to work, which a scale that scores strain and motivation separately would not show. Third, "no pressure" and expectation coexisted (3.4), so a measure of reported pressure could rate such a family as low-demand although the student studies for finishing. Students rarely spoke of orders to be obeyed, resembling reciprocal more than authoritarian filial piety (Guo *et al.*, 2023) in wording only. These are readings of 33 short answers, not evidence against scales; a study pairing both could test them.

A reading through utang na loob. The repeated image of repayment with no end point, "someday" or "balang araw", is close to descriptions of utang na loob as a debt of gratitude without a fixed settlement (Hollnsteiner, 1961; Kaut, 1961; Mabaquiao & Piamonte, 2024). We used the concept to look, not to code; students never used the term. Our data cannot show the moral ambivalence described in Mabaquiao and Piamonte (2024) beyond the few who named pressure.

Beyond abstract and pragmatic value. Many pragmatic reasons here are relational: the degree is wanted so that parents can rest, "someday" help is possible, or sacrifice is not wasted. Prompt 5 suggested the same in reverse, with free tuition read as lightening parents' load and overseas work as support for the family. A phenomenological study of Filipino college students separated for years from parents working overseas likewise found that students valued their parents' sacrifice and mostly described it as a push to study, not a setback (Gaspan & Sasot, 2024). For these students pragmatic value (Bernardo, 2003) may be partly shared with the family.

Two readings of pressure. Pressure joining the path of effort may describe how these students cope, by giving strain a purpose, or may reflect what they felt able to write for a teacher or researcher. The data cannot separate the two, and if the second holds, strain is understated. Strain is not rare among Filipino students: senior high school students in one survey reported high academic stress, which was associated with their time management and well-being (Ay-ad, 2026). Strain may also go unsaid: a scale built from first-generation students' voices lists pressure to succeed among four parts of family achievement guilt, which predicted more interdependent motives for attending college (Covarrubias *et al.*, 2020). We did not measure guilt; counselors should ask, not assume.

Comparison with Earlier Work

Relation to earlier work. The link between studying and parental sacrifice agrees with qualitative reports on perfectionism (Tan, 2022), adjustment (Mirote, 2026), and utang na loob among young Filipinos (Abogadie *et al.*, 2025; Casiño *et al.*, 2025), and in direction with survey and experimental work on family obligation and motivation (Fuligni *et al.*, 1999; Retuya *et al.*, 2017). Interviews with high school seniors found five patterns of perceived family influence, including Family Obligation and Family Pleasing, that differed by generational status and native country (Urdan *et al.*, 2007); our students' accounts sound closest to Family Obligation, a resemblance we did not test.

Differences and limits of comparison. Two differences are worth stating. The first-generation students in the American universities studied by Stephens *et al.* (2012) held interdependent reasons for attending college that clashed with an independent institutional norm and were associated with lower grades; our students described interdependence as the reason they study and gave no sign of such a clash, although we did not ask about their universities. And Chinese primary school students showed different outcomes for reciprocal and authoritarian beliefs (Guo *et al.*, 2023); our students seldom spoke of obedience, but our data contain no outcomes, so we cannot say whether reciprocity here helps. Differences in age, country, method, and measure mean that none of these comparisons is a contradiction.

Beyond the Philippines. Reciprocal filial piety was linked to achievement, partly through autonomy, among Chinese junior high students and in country-level data from many countries (Zhou *et al.*, 2020), and family obligation was linked to motivation in American adolescents (Fuligni *et al.*, 1999), to collectivistic motives in U.S. first-year students (Vasquez-Salgado *et al.*, 2021), and familismo, mainly its family support part, predicted academic motivation in some Latinx college students (Azpeitia & Bacio, 2022). All used scales. What may be local is the open-ended wording of the return, "someday"; the sequence of sacrifice seen, return owed, and effort given may be compared elsewhere.

Implications

For theory. For research on family obligation and academic motivation, the results suggest attending to how students join strain and motivation, since scales that score them separately may not capture a student who treats one as the source of the other. For the abstract and pragmatic distinction (Bernardo, 2003), the results suggest a relational layer, in which the value of education is partly held on behalf of the family. For work on utang na loob, the results offer student wording, such as "masuklian", "ibalik", and "balang araw", that could ground items in how students speak.

For guidance and counseling staff. Family expectations are better opened for discussion than assumed to be a burden or a blessing. Following the framework, advisers could ask who made it possible for you to be here, what a good return would look like, and where that feels heavy; these questions are untested. They invite a student to say what is being repaid before anyone judges whether the repayment is healthy, and they leave room for the student who says there is no pressure but whose answer still ties studying to family (3.4). A critical review calls for asset-based, family-centered work with first-generation students (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021); the framework is one starting point.

For faculty and advisers. Messages that present study as a purely personal project may not match how these students describe their reasons. Our data do not show

that such messages do harm, and they do not show that family-centered messages would help; we note only that an adviser who knows whom a student is studying for can ask a more relevant question. Students who name pressure (3.3) did not describe it as a reason to stop, which should not be read as a reason to add pressure.

For policy and programs. Students read free tuition as lightening parents' load (3.5), and overseas work as a way to support the family. These are beliefs, not evidence about what free tuition does for enrolment or persistence. Programs that already involve families, such as orientation sessions or parent days, could ask students and parents what each expects the degree to return, since the framework suggests those expectations are part of how students understand why they are enrolled.

Propositions and Directions for Future Research

Because the framework was built from the responses it explains, it should be treated as a set of propositions for other data. We state three, first, students who describe parents' sacrifice as a debt with no fixed end will more often describe effort and finishing as repayment than students who describe family only as support, second, pressure that students frame as a reason to work will be found with persistence, while pressure framed as a debt that cannot be repaid will be found with strain; this follows the view that utang na loob has good and harmful forms (Mabaquiao & Piamonte, 2024) and the finding that it correlated with both parental pressure and anxiety (Dizon *et al.*, 2025), though neither study tested the proposition, and third, families who say they do not pressure but expect completion exist in larger samples, and measures of perceived parental pressure may rate them as low-demand.

Several designs could test these where interviews with students, and separately with parents, could show whether parents describe the same return. A mixed design could pair an open prompt like ours with scales of reciprocal and authoritarian filial piety (Guo *et al.*, 2023; Zhou *et al.*, 2020) and of family achievement guilt (Covarrubias *et al.*, 2020), to see whether what students write matches what the scales record. A study following first-year students across the year could show whether the language of "someday" changes as academic demands rise. Comparisons by sibling position, as in work on working eldest children (Lasanas *et al.*, 2024), by program, region, and living arrangement, including living away from home (Cabias & Guarino, 2026), would show where the framework does and does not hold, and with consent, grades and retention records could be added, which is the only route to the performance question we cannot answer.

Limitations

The sample comes from two state universities and colleges and four programs, with no demographic data, so differences by sex, income, or region could not be examined. The results describe these 33 students at one point in the first year; "most" and "a few" are descriptive and are not estimates for first-year students in the Philippines, the same questions asked later in the year, or of students who have left, might draw other answers, and with no parents' accounts or grades, the study cannot show that reciprocity helps or harms performance.

Prompt 4 asked directly about family, so its prominence there is partly produced by the question; the more telling evidence is the family framing in prompts 1 and 5, though fewer. Short answers cannot show how strongly pressure is felt, and students may have said what seemed acceptable for a teacher or researcher. Our translations may lose nuance, particularly for Ilocano and for code-switched sentences, where a single word such as "sakripisyo" or "maiahon" carries more than its English gloss. Only two students named distance from family, which short answers may understate; interviews elsewhere found first-year students living away from home missing unsolicited care (Cabias & Guarino, 2026), a reason for caution and not evidence about these students.

The framework was built from the same 33 responses it explains, so it is a proposal and not a test. The second coding pass of 15 prompt-4 responses was made by an AI model and its codes were checked by the researchers, so it checks consistent use of the code definitions and is not an independent comparison between human coders. The authors are guidance and education professionals, and a habit of reading family as a resource may have shaped which passages seemed meaningful; the reflexivity statement describes our positions, but it cannot remove the influence. The framework also describes what students said about their reasons for studying, not how they behave: a student who speaks of repayment may study no more or less than one who does not. Because the data were archived, we could not return to students to probe short answers or to check our interpretations with them (section 2.8).

CONCLUSION

The first-year Filipino undergraduates participating in this study viewed studying largely as an act of the self with the family. In response to the main research question, the students' descriptions were consistent with a model of reciprocal studying: the sacrifice of the parents is recognized, interpreted as a call for repayment without a clear endpoint, and compensated through effort and completion. Pressure was identified by some participants as part of their description of turning pressure into effort, while the two students who stated that their parents did not put pressure on them still viewed their studies as tied to family. Counselors might inquire about who the students study for and what it means to them, rather than making assumptions about whether family is supportive or burdensome.

The research provides three contributions. It provides an interpretation of family and studying based on the students' definition of what the purpose of education is, rather than an assessment based on a scale. It

demonstrates that pressure and motivation can be on one route, and the lack of mentioned pressure does not imply the lack of interest in completion. And it makes a claim within a framework that can be refuted by other data. The contributions are based on 33 short answers in interviews from two state universities, and they are the basis for further research, not the general description of Filipino students.

In this case, to ask why they learn is to ask to whom they owe something. Advisers, counselors, and programs can start from what the students themselves understand the degree to be for, rather than make the assumption about the family being either a source of support or a burden. This framework provides an opportunity to ask such questions, and the studies proposed in section 4.5 can test it.

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