

An Assessment of the Burnout Levels of Accountancy Students

¹Kristine June D. Uy, ¹Jun Brian B. Alenton, ¹Marjurie Lourince E. Zanoria and ²Helmae N. Etulle

Abstract

This study evaluated the burnout levels among college students enrolled in the 3rd year and 4th year. Recognizing the uniqueness and the technical nature of the Bachelor of Science in Accountancy, and seeing that there is a dearth of literature that examined burnout in this particular program, the researchers assessed the burnout levels of 220 accountancy students in the 3rd year and 4th year. The results revealed that about 98% of the entire sample registered a high burnout level in the dimension of reduced personal accomplishment, suggesting that the students feel less empowered and less confident in their academic undertakings. Using the Kruskal – Wallis test, the researchers also noticed that 3rd year students showed a higher level of burnout in the area of emotional exhaustion. There was no significant difference that existed in the burnout dimensions of depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment.

Keywords: accounting education, student burnout, accountancy students

1.0 Introduction

The excitement of attaining a college degree often extends to the anticipation of choosing and pursuing a specific degree program. From diversified options of courses to take up, one often selects a degree that will yield a promising and profitable future. Indeed, interest in the degree may come as a factor in choosing, but the promise of a bright future cannot be discounted. For several years, the accountancy degree is unquestionably one of the top choices for a college course program. The established integrity of the profession, the potential for personal economic advancement, and the boundless opportunities that await successful passers who eventually become certified public accountants are the key reasons why many students take up this program. However, a degree in accountancy is quite tough to attain. Only qualified and highly competent individuals are licensed to practice the profession.

As such, higher educational institutions offering a degree in accountancy place strenuous and rigid training schemes to make sure that graduates are prepared for the board examination by imbibing the necessary skills, competence and values that a credible and objective accountant must possess. An accountancy student has to endure four to five years of highly technical groundwork and skills development in preparation for an exhaustingly difficult licensure examination. Current trends implemented among higher educational institutions include the imposition of cut-off grades and conducting qualifying level exams. Cut-off grades are usually higher than the normal passing rate, which makes it all the more challenging to achieve than most of the other non-accounting subjects. Qualifying examinations are also conducted just to make sure each candidate can meet the high standards and technical competence essential to the profession. All these

¹College of Commerce

²College of Education

University of San Jose-Recoletos

systems may ideally accomplish the goal, but they are all subject to the constraints of the human aspect of an individual. Fresh out of high school, students who chose to take up Bachelor of Science in Accountancy may carry on the enthusiasm and vigor. As the program progresses, the demands and the pressures mount up thus causing the waning of students' engagement. When several major subjects are taken up at one term, often during the junior and senior years, students experience high levels of stress and anxiety. On a daily basis, students are faced with the fact that they have to juggle time, academic demands, personal and social life, and relationships all at the same time. It is but human for students to reach the point of saturation and overload, causing them to feel exhausted and probably hopeless, all leading to stress and burnout.

Burnout is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who work with people in some capacity (Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter, 1996). In addition, Freudenberger (1974) referred to burnout as the gradual emotional depletion, loss of motivation, and reduced commitment. It is worth noting that the common ground for burnout is the emotional aspect of a person; this can be related to students, who, in their teen years, are very sentimental. As cited by Schaufeli, Leiter, and Maslach (2009), many factors cause burnout, and the most obtrusive is the imbalance between demands and resources. Among the students, the highly-demanding nature of the accountancy program, the limited time to study plus the pressure to beat the cut-off grade spell the imbalance. Furthermore, it is now recognized that, although students are not formally employed by the university, their studies beset coercive activities (Hu and Schaufeli, 2009, as cited by Rostami, Abedi, and Schaufeli, 2012) such as complying with disparate requisites under a

time constraint and studying until the wee hours of the morning, that can be already considered work.

Boudreau, Santen, Hemphill, and Dobson (2004) found out that burnout was assessed with various stressors including concern about academic grades, uncertainty about the future, low levels of control, less satisfaction with the balance between personal and student life and low levels of support from peers and friends, in some cases. Aside from academic – related factors, Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, and Schaufeli (2000) stressed the importance of life satisfaction, referring to it as the extent to how much a person's life satisfies his/her physical and psychological desires and wishes, particularly as a student. When students get overly involved emotionally, they overwork themselves. Upon doing this, they are undergoing a stressful interaction leading to emotional exhaustion. Once debilitated, they try to cope by cutting back on their involvement with others. It is what is commonly known as psychological detachment (Demerouti et al, 2000). During exhaustion, there is already some emotional distance between them and the people who are trying to help (Pons, 1995). Depersonalization would afterward slowly devour the student's personality. Following a period of depersonalization, the third aspect of burnout appears: a feeling of reduced personal accomplishment. At this point, students feel inadequate about their capability to pass the subject and they believe they have chosen the wrong course. A negative thinking such as this crumbles their self-esteem and makes them feel depressed. This justifies why students have multifarious behavior and personality (Celik and Oral, 2013).

If "stress" is considered a common word in our daily lives, then certainly the same would apply to "burnout" (McCormick and Barnett, 2011). Several instruments have been developed to measure burnout; however, the Maslach Burnout Inventory

(MBI) has been the most auspicious. For this reason, the MBI has been documented to be widely accepted in the United States of America, United Kingdom and other European countries (Coker, 2009). It is useful to assess burnout in human service, education and other professions and to understand its nature for developing effective interventions since many studies corroborate that academic burnout is a compelling problem associated with poor academic performance (Schaufeli, Martinez, Pinto, Salanova, and Bakker, 2002), low self-efficacy (Yang, 2004), concern over mistakes (Zhang, Gan, and Cham, 2007), and low coping effectiveness (Gan, Shang, and Zhang 2007).

Although burnout was originally explored in the context of work, it has extended its reach to schoolwork and student life (Kutsal and Bilge, 2012). Research had been conducted in the comparison of burnout levels between Caucasian and Asian students (Leong, Mallinckrodt, & Kralj, 1990), with findings that posited Caucasian students exhibited burnout more frequently and more intensely than their Asian counterparts. Schaufeli et al (2002) conducted a cross-national study on burnout and engagement among university students from Spain, Portugal, and Netherlands. Adapting the Maslach Burnout Inventory for students and the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale for students, the study was able to spot the negative correlation between burnout and engagement. Zhang, Gan, and Cham (2007) added a third component and tested the relationships that exist among perfectionism, burnout, and engagement in 482 undergraduate students. In the study they found out that burnout and engagement were moderately and negatively correlated, while negative perfectionism correlated with burnout. What is interesting to note, however, is that many of the research on student burnout centered on those taking medical degrees. Badran, Al-Ali,

Dubais, and Amin (2010) looked into the level of burnout among 307 dental students in 2 Jordanian universities and ascertained that, among the three subscales of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (i.e. emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment), they registered high burnout rates in emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, while Montero-Marin et al (2011) examined burnout levels among dental students through the use of the Burnout Clinical Subtype Questionnaire and established three different subtypes of burnout --- overload, lack of development, and neglect. Medical students have also been one of the favorite subjects of burnout as evidenced by the abundant researches surrounding them (Akansel et al, 2012; Chang, Eddins-Folensbee, Coverdale, 2012; Galán, Sanmartin, Giner, 2011; Fang, Young, Golshan, Moutier, and Zisook, 2012; West, Dyrbye, Sloan, and Shanafelt, 2009; Dunn, Iglewicz, and Moutier, 2008; Dyrbye, Thomas, Huschka, Lawson, 2006; Ried, Motycka, Mobley, and Meldrum, 2006; Dick and Anderson, 1993). In as far as the reseachers are aware, there are a few studies that inspected burnout levels of business students (Galbraith and Merrill, 2012; Law, 2010; Uludag and Yaratana, 2010), but none that scrutinized burnout of accountancy students. As such, this is the gap that the researchers wish to address.

This study, therefore, aimed to consider student burnout among college junior and senior accountancy students. Recognizing the uniqueness of the environment in which the students of the Bachelor of Science in Accountancy operate, the researchers deemed it appropriate to explore the burnout levels exhibited by these students. It is believed that this will subsequently lend insights on the current curriculum that produces certified public accountants and will allow the researchers to point out areas which need to be improved and put forward recommendations when deemed

necessary.

2.0 Methodology

This section presents the participants of the study, the instrument and measures used in the assessment of burnout levels, and the research questions that the researchers aimed to answer.

Participants

A total of 220 students from a local university served as respondents for this study. The respondents represented the 3rd year (n=145) and 4th year (n=75) students enrolled in the program Bachelor of Science in Accountancy for the second semester of school year 2013-2014. Evaluating the current curriculum of this program, the researchers observed that the first two years of the course have an equal number of units attributed to its major subjects (i.e. 6 academic units). The 3rd year, on the other hand, skyrocketed to 18 academic units for each semester. The 4th year contains 12 and 15 academic units for the 1st and 2nd semester, respectively. It is also to be mentioned that this local university follows the practice of imposing a cut-off grade of 2.0 (equivalent to 80%) for the students' major subjects covering accounting, taxation, and law. Owing to the pressure noticeably present in these year levels, the researchers opted to test burnout levels in the junior and senior years.

Measures and Procedures

The history of burnout measurement as reviewed by Schaufeli (1993) disclosed the circuitous record of how burnout was attempted to be measured. Eventually, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach and Jackson, 1981) emerged as the "most widely used self-report instrument" (Schaufeli, 1993). The said instrument mirrored the authors' definition of burnout as a syndrome that is characterized by three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced

personal accomplishment. It is to be noted, however, that the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was originally crafted with the view that burnout is limited to those involved in the human services profession. With this in mind, the researchers opted to utilize the Maslach Burnout Inventory as modified by Schaufeli et al (1996) and adapted for use in the study of burnout among students.

The modified MBI for student survey (hereinafter referred to as MBI – SS) is made up of 15 face valid statements that measure the respondent's level of burnout in three distinct dimensions --- emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. The 15 face valid statements are distributed to the dimensions as follows: 5 statements for emotional exhaustion; 4 statements for depersonalization or cynicism; and 6 statements for reduced personal accomplishment. Each item is rated on a 7 point frequency rating, with 0 interpreted as never and 6 interpreted as always. The instrument was administered to the respondents after the necessary approval and consent were obtained. Results were then tallied and analyzed. Using descriptive statistics, the researchers compared the level of burnout between the junior and senior accountancy students. In addition, we ran the Kruskal-Wallis test in order to evaluate the levels of student burnout between the junior and senior students.

Research Questions

The researchers considered the number of academic units allocated to major subjects to be a source of burnout to the students. Bearing in mind that 3rd year students have to attend to 18 academic units as compared to the 15 academic units of the 4th year students, it is posited that a difference in the level of burnout will be displayed between the two year levels. Given that each of these major subjects demand a cutoff grade of

2.0 (equivalent to 80%), it is then expected that this will take much toll on the emotions and the perceptions of the respondents. As such, the researchers endeavored to look into the burnout levels as manifested by the 3rd year and 4th year students in the areas of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. In addition, this paper aimed to ascertain whether a significant difference in the levels of burnout in the dimensions mentioned exists between the two year levels.

Limitation of the Study

The MBI-SS employed in this study only made use of the generic term "studies" in its face valid statements intended to assess burnout levels. As such, no discrimination was made between major subjects and non-major subjects. Although considered a limitation, the researchers believed that this will not have a significant effect on the results of the study. The non-major subjects only comprise, on the average, 6 out of the 24 units enrolled in the semester when the study was conducted.

3.0 Results and Analyses

The first step in the assessment of burnout was administering the MBI – SS to the respondents.

Table 1 shows the burnout level of the population for each dimension where EE = Emotional Exhaustion, DP = Depersonalization, and RPA = Reduced Personal Accomplishment. It must be pointed out that the MBI – SS is scored in such a way that higher scores for the first two dimensions signify high burnout levels. The dimension on reduced personal accomplishment (RPA), however, is scored reversely. As such, the lower the score, the higher the level of burnout.

The researchers also proceeded to look into the profile of burnout levels among the students. For each dimension, the number and percentage of students who registered high, moderate, and low burnout levels were determined. In order to draw more specific scrutiny, the researchers further determined the breakdown of the measurement of burnout per year level. Tables 1, 2A, and 2B show the summary.

Tables 1, 2A, and 2B show that, whether it is in the context of the entire sample or the perspective per stratum, the students exhibited moderate levels of burnout in the dimension of emotional exhaustion while low levels of burnout were shown in the area of depersonalization. What is most remarkable, however, was the very high percentage of respondents who were shown to have a high level of burnout in the dimension of

Table 1: Burnout Levels per Dimension (n = 220)

	HIGH		MODERATE		LOW		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
EE	18	8.18	135	61.36	67	30.45	220	100.00
DP	29	13.18	85	38.64	106	48.18	220	100.00
RPA	216	98.18	4	1.82	0	0.00	220	100.00

Table 2A: Burnout Levels of 3rd year Students per Dimension

	HIGH		MODERATE		LOW		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
EE	12	8.28	96	66.21	37	25.52	145	100.00
DP	22	15.17	52	35.86	71	48.97	145	100.00
RPA	144	99.31	1	0.69	0	0.00	145	100.00

Table 2B: Burnout Levels of 4th Year Students per Dimension

	HIGH		MODERATE		LOW		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
EE	6	8.00	39	52.00	30	40.00	75	100.00
DP	7	9.33	33	44.00	35	46.67	75	100.00
RPA	72	96.00	3	4.00	0	0.00	75	100.00

reduced personal accomplishment. This means that the students enrolled in the 3rd year and 4th year of the Bachelor of Science in Accountancy course have the tendency to perceive themselves pessimistically, especially in relation to their studies. A closer inspection of the MBI – SS showed that this 6 item dimension looked into the following sentiments: “I can effectively solve the problems that arise in my studies”; “I believe that I make an effective contribution to the classes that I attend”; “In my opinion, I am a good student”; “I feel stimulated when I achieve my study goals”; I have learned many interesting things during the course of my studies”; “During class, I feel confident that I am effective in getting things done”. These statements reflect the students’ perception as to the level of accomplishment that they attribute to their efforts in the classroom. Since they registered a high level of burnout in this area, the results reflect that students do not feel that they have achieved much in their studies.

Attending to the testing of the hypotheses outlined in the previous section of this paper, the researchers then tested for significant differences

between the junior and senior accountancy students through the use of the Kruskal-Wallis test. Table 3 shows the results for all three dimensions.

Table 3 shows that the dimensions of depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment do not show a significant difference. This means that, regardless of year level, students feel and undergo similar levels of burnout. Depersonalization explores feelings of burnout that relate primarily to the students’ belief of the importance of their studies while reduced personal accomplishment looks into the students’ confidence of their performance and accomplishments in class. The absence of significant difference in these dimensions may be attributed to the clarity of the career opportunities open for certified public accountants; thus, the importance of the course is established. In addition, the technical nature of their major subjects together with the complex computations and concepts discussed may have aided in bleak outlooks pertaining to their accomplishments in class; thus, similar levels of reduced personal accomplishment.

Table 3: Kruskal – Wallis Test Results

EE	N	Median	Ave Rank	Z
3rd year	145	20	116.6	1.98
4th year	75	18	98.7	-1.98
Overall	220		110.5	
H = 3.93 DF = 1 P = 0.047				
H = 3.95 DF = 1 P = 0.047 (adjusted for ties)				

DP	N	Median	Ave Rank	Z
3rd year	145	7	111.4	0.29
4th year	75	7	108.8	-0.29
Overall	220		110.5	
H = 0.09 DF = 1 P = 0.771				
H = 0.09 DF = 1 P = 0.770 (adjusted for ties)				

RPA	N	Median	Ave Rank	Z
3rd year	145	24	104.8	1.85
4th year	75	25	121.5	-1.85
Overall	220		110.5	
H = 3.41 DF = 1 P = 0.065				
H = 3.43 DF = 1 P = 0.064 (adjusted for ties)				

Table 3 also shows that, among the three dimensions, only emotional exhaustion displayed a p value of less than 0.05 which means that only the first hypothesis foretelling the significant difference in the level of burnout as manifested through emotional exhaustion was supported. The 5 item dimension on emotional exhaustion contained statements that assess a student's outlook toward the following statements: "I feel emotionally drained by my studies"; "I feel used up at the end of the day at the university"; "I feel tired when I get up in the morning and I have to face another day at the university"; "Studying or attending class is really a strain for me"; "I feel burned out from my studies". To investigate the significant difference noticed between the 3rd year and 4th year students in this dimension, the researchers revisited the prospectus of the Bachelor of Science in Accountancy program of the local university where the respondents come from. It was noted that, although there is only a

3 academic unit difference in favor of the 4th year students, the degree of difficulty and the nature of the major subjects enrolled during the semester that this study was conducted leaned heavily against the 3rd year students. With the numerous requirements competing for their time, the concern over meeting the cut-off grade, and the uncertainty of making it through the qualifying examinations make the semester especially burdensome to the 3rd year students.

4.0 Conclusion

Accounting has been given the distinct honor of being called the language of business. The critical role that it plays in the businesses and the economies all over the globe cannot be discounted. As such, it is expected that measures should be instituted to ensure that accountants -- the people bestowed with the privilege of communicating that language -- embody competence and adhere to the ethical requirements demanded of them by the profession and the public. These measures start as early as the choice to enroll in the Bachelor of Science in Accountancy program is made, and continues well into the advancement in the course. With the aim of looking after their students' best interest in terms of passing the licensure examination for certified public accountants, schools have become fixated with balancing course content and educational requirements.

Indeed, for institutions of higher education, these measures may seem to be the answer for the demand of choice graduates who will eventually become high quality certified public accountants. It may even be considered a "necessary evil." However, teachers and academic administrators must recognize that more often than not, these demands come at a price; a price that is usually collected through the students' burnout levels. The results of this study pointed out that the students in the accountancy program experienced an

alarmingly high level of burnout in the dimension of reduced personal accomplishment which prompted the researchers to posit that a program as content driven and as technical as the Bachelor of Science in Accountancy may leave students feeling less empowered and less confident in their academic undertakings. In addition, a significant difference existed between the burnout levels of the 3rd year and 4th year accountancy students in the area of emotional exhaustion. This led the researchers to contemplate on the weight of academic pressure placed on the students and the role that it plays on the students' sentiments toward their studies.

In conclusion, the researchers point out that while the necessity of producing graduates who will pass the licensure examination is imperative, teachers and academic administrators must recognize that actions also need to be taken in order to help their students cope with burnout. A careful and thorough curriculum review must be put in place, with special consideration given to the distribution of academic units related to major subjects. In addition, an exhaustive probe must be made in the area of subject difficulty in order to achieve a balance among highly complicated and moderately complex subject matters so as not to overwhelm the students. Retention policies must also be revisited. The administrators and the faculty should look into the necessity of having multiple schemes for determining student retention such as requiring cut off grades on top of the qualifying examinations. Furthermore, innovations must be made in the area of instruction. While the researchers realize that the curriculum of the Bachelor of Science in Accountancy cannot completely eradicate the focus on content because of the board examinations, teaching methodologies and classroom activities that empower the students must be included in order for the students to recognize the importance

of their inputs in the class. Administrators and teachers must take a proactive stand in helping students deal with burnout. After all, the measures instituted by educational institutions regarding student acceptance and retention may be all for naught if burnout will prove to be the culprit that jeopardizes student academic achievement.

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