

# The Dynamics of Vulnerability, Agency and Mental Health Challenges among Students

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## ABSTRACT

Students in higher education face challenges stemming from academic, financial, and social stressors, which can have a significant impact on their mental health and well-being. However, the influence of students' vulnerability and agency on mental health has not been fully examined. This study aimed to investigate the relationships between vulnerability, agency, and mental health challenges among students at South Cotabato State College, focusing on academic, financial, and social dimensions. The study employed a descriptive-correlational design, with 280 students selected through stratified random sampling. The Spearman rank correlation coefficient was used to analyze the data. Results indicated a strong positive correlation between vulnerability and mental health challenges, suggesting that higher vulnerability levels are associated with greater mental health struggles. In contrast, agency showed a very weak negative correlation with mental health challenges, indicating that although students exhibited high levels of agency, it did not significantly reduce mental health issues. These findings imply the need for comprehensive support systems that address vulnerabilities, especially in academic, financial, and social contexts, while also considering students' agency in relation to broader environmental factors. It is recommended that educational institutions integrate targeted programs that mitigate vulnerability and support mental health without solely relying on individual attributes. Further research could expand on these findings by examining additional variables influencing student well-being.

## KEYWORDS

Vulnerability; agency; mental health challenges; higher education; students

## INTRODUCTION

Well-being is a multifaceted concept encompassing physical, emotional, social, and mental dimensions, each contributing to an individual's overall health. Within the educational context, well-being is integral to students' academic performance, personal growth, and social relationships (Phan & Ngu, 2020). The dynamics of vulnerability and agency are particularly significant in understanding how students navigate the challenges that impact their well-being. Vulnerability captures the susceptibility of students to stressors—such as academic demands or financial difficulties—that can undermine their mental and emotional health (Gellisch et al., 2024). In contrast, agency reflects the capacity of students to make informed decisions, exercise control over their circumstances, and take proactive steps to safeguard their well-being (Zilberstein et al., 2024). Together, these constructs shape the ways in which students manage and respond to the challenges they encounter.

Despite its importance, students' well-being is often compromised by a range of challenges they face during their academic journey. Academic pressures, financial

instability, and social isolation can lead to heightened stress and mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and burnout (Mofatteh, 2020). The lack of adequate institutional support, including limited access to mental health resources and insufficient coping mechanisms (Semo & Frissa, 2020), further exacerbates these issues. The failure to address these concerns within educational settings leaves students vulnerable, affecting their ability to thrive both academically and personally.

While existing research extensively addresses well-being in higher education, a notable gap remains regarding the specific challenges faced by students in less-resourced regional institutions. Most studies have focused on urban or well-funded universities, often overlooking the unique socio-economic, cultural, and institutional dynamics present in regional contexts (Metzl et al. 2021; Karim, 2024). This gap in the literature limits the understanding of how vulnerability and agency operate in these settings and the ways in which these factors influence students' mental health and academic outcomes.

The study examines the dynamics of well-being, vulnerability, and agency within a local context, focusing on students at South Cotabato State College. It aims to assess the mental health challenges faced by students, exploring how vulnerability and agency contribute to shaping their overall well-being. Additionally, the research will investigate the interaction between these variables, analyzing how vulnerability and agency influence each other and collectively impact students' mental health outcomes. This examination seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the specific challenges students encounter in less-resourced educational environments.

### **Objective**

This study aims to explore the dynamics of well-being, vulnerability, and agency among students at South Cotabato State College. Specifically, it seeks to assess how vulnerability and agency influence students' mental health, focusing on the extent of these factors within the context of a less-resourced educational environment. Specifically, it aims to:

1. Assess the level of vulnerability among students at South Cotabato State College, focusing on academic, financial, and social vulnerability;
2. Evaluate the level of agency among students, examining self-efficacy, goal-orientation, and decision-making ability;
3. Identify the level of mental health challenges faced by students, with particular attention to stress, anxiety, and depression;
4. Investigate the relationship between vulnerability and mental health challenges among students, and;

Explore the relationship between agency and mental health challenges among students.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In higher education, the well-being of students is profoundly influenced by various interrelated factors that shape their academic and emotional experiences. Vulnerability, agency, and mental health challenges are central constructs in understanding students' capacity to navigate the demands of university life. These three elements are interwoven in complex ways, influencing not only academic performance but also emotional resilience, social integration, and overall well-being (Liu & Huang, 2021). A growing body of literature has focused on how vulnerability increases the likelihood of experiencing mental health challenges (Codagnone et al., 2020), while agency, although protective, does not necessarily mitigate these challenges without proper support systems (Asbrand et al., 2024). A comprehensive exploration of these factors reveals the intricate dynamics that institutions must address to foster a supportive and conducive learning environment for all

students.

The influence of vulnerability on student mental health has been extensively documented, with researchers noting the significant impact of financial, academic, and social stressors. Financial instability, for instance, is often cited as a primary factor leading to stress, anxiety, and even depression among students, with those from low socioeconomic backgrounds facing heightened risks (Mofatteh, 2020). Additionally, the academic environment itself, marked by high expectations and the pressure to succeed, contributes significantly to student vulnerability (Ross et al., 2024). Social isolation, often exacerbated by the transition to university life, further compounds these challenges, limiting students' ability to engage fully with academic and extracurricular activities (Chemagosi, 2024). Given these pressures, students' vulnerability can hinder their ability to cope with academic demands, leading to deteriorating mental health outcomes.

While vulnerability poses significant risks, agency plays an important role in mitigating these effects. Agency, defined by an individual's capacity for self-efficacy, goal orientation, and decision-making, represents a critical factor in students' ability to take control of their academic and personal lives (Nunes et al., 2022; Code, 2020). High levels of agency are associated with greater resilience, as students with stronger self-efficacy tend to exhibit proactive coping strategies and problem-solving skills (Shengyao et al., 2024). However, it is important to recognize that agency alone is insufficient in overcoming the challenges posed by vulnerability. Without addressing external stressors such as financial strain or academic pressure, students may find their agency undermined, especially when their resources for coping are stretched thin. Research emphasizes the need for a balanced approach that enhances both students' agency and their capacity to manage vulnerability, as these two factors do not operate in isolation.

Mental health challenges, particularly stress, anxiety, and depression, are pervasive among college students, reflecting the cumulative burden of academic, financial, and social stressors (Chung & Park, 2024). Extensive studies have highlighted that these challenges are not only a barrier to academic achievement but also have long-term implications for students' emotional well-being and overall quality of life (de Sousa Alvarenga et al., 2020). Although the prevalence of mental health issues is widely recognized, the severity and nature of these challenges vary according to individual and contextual factors (Sheldon et al., 2021). For students experiencing high levels of vulnerability, the risk of developing significant mental health issues is particularly pronounced (Limone & Toto, 2022). These students are more likely to report high levels of stress and anxiety, which can, in turn, affect their academic focus, motivation, and performance. Despite this, the role of agency in mitigating the impact of mental health challenges remains a topic of considerable debate. While higher agency has been linked to more effective coping mechanisms, its capacity to protect against mental health challenges is limited when students face high levels of vulnerability or lack access to institutional support (Lawrance et al., 2020).

Taken together, the relationships between vulnerability, agency, and mental health challenges are crucial in understanding the well-being of students in higher education. The interaction between these factors requires a multifaceted approach to student support, one that not only addresses the external stressors contributing to vulnerability but also fosters the development of agency. Academic institutions play a critical role in this process, offering resources and interventions that help students manage vulnerability while enhancing their ability to exercise agency. Effective support systems that integrate mental health services, financial aid, and academic counseling are essential in ensuring students' holistic success, both inside and outside the classroom. Moreover, future research should continue to explore the dynamic interactions among these variables, emphasizing the

importance of context and individual differences in shaping students' experiences and outcomes in higher education.

### **Vulnerability**

Vulnerability in higher education encompasses various factors that can predispose students to emotional distress and hinder their academic success (Limone & Toto, 2022). Financial vulnerability, characterized by limited access to resources and economic hardship, is frequently cited as a primary stressor (Friedline et al., 2021). Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to experience chronic financial stress, which can compromise their ability to focus on studies, access academic resources, or participate in extracurricular activities. The financial strain exacerbates feelings of insecurity, leading to higher levels of anxiety and stress (Coakley et al., 2022). Additionally, academic vulnerability, shaped by the pressure to perform in competitive environments, can contribute to feelings of inadequacy and fear of failure (Schuurmans, 2020). This pressure is particularly salient among first-generation college students, who may face heightened challenges in adjusting to the demands of university life. Social vulnerability, including experiences of isolation or discrimination, also plays a significant role in mental health outcomes. Students who perceive a lack of social support or who experience exclusion due to race, gender, or other factors are at an increased risk for anxiety and depression.

Research consistently shows that students facing high vulnerability are more likely to report mental health challenges, including stress, anxiety, and depression. The cumulative nature of these stressors can create a vicious cycle, wherein vulnerability exacerbates mental health issues, which in turn hinder academic performance, creating further feelings of helplessness. Therefore, addressing vulnerability is critical not only for improving students' mental health but also for fostering an environment conducive to academic success.

### **Agency**

Agency refers to students' capacity for self-determination, resilience, and control over their actions, particularly in response to stressors (Toste et al., 2021). A student with high agency is more likely to exhibit self-efficacy, goal orientation, and effective decision-making abilities (Code, 2020). These traits enable students to manage challenges with greater resilience, proactively addressing obstacles and seeking solutions. Research has shown that agency can buffer the negative effects of vulnerability, providing students with the tools to navigate academic and personal challenges. However, agency does not operate in isolation, and its protective effects are contingent on the presence of other factors, such as adequate resources, social support, and mental health services (Motillon-Toudic et al., 2022). In environments where vulnerability is high, the limitations of individual agency become apparent. For instance, students who lack financial resources or social support, even if they possess high levels of self-efficacy, may still struggle to cope effectively with academic pressures.

Although agency can contribute to personal growth and academic success, its impact on mental health outcomes is more limited when students face substantial vulnerability. The interaction between vulnerability and agency highlights the need for a multifaceted approach to student support, one that not only fosters agency but also addresses the external factors that hinder students' ability to thrive.

### **Mental Health Challenges**

Mental health challenges, including stress, anxiety, and depression, are prevalent among

college students, affecting both their academic performance and overall well-being (Motillon-Toudic et al., 2022). These challenges are often exacerbated by the pressures of higher education, including academic demands, social integration, and financial stress. Stress and anxiety are the most commonly reported mental health challenges, with students often facing significant pressure to meet academic expectations, secure employment, and navigate social relationships (Pascoe et Al., 2020). Additionally, depression is a common consequence of prolonged stress, leading to feelings of hopelessness, disengagement, and a diminished capacity for coping with daily demands (Cage et al., 2021).

The interplay between vulnerability and mental health challenges is well-established, with higher levels of vulnerability significantly increasing the risk of mental health problems (Mezzina et al., 2022). However, the role of agency in mitigating mental health challenges is more complex. While agency can promote resilience, it may not fully protect students from the emotional and psychological toll of vulnerability (Lawrance et al., 2022). The presence of institutional support systems, such as counseling services, peer networks, and academic resources, is critical in buffering the effects of mental health challenges. As such, addressing mental health challenges requires a holistic approach that integrates interventions targeting both individual agency and the broader environmental factors contributing to vulnerability.

Hence, the literature highlights the interconnected nature of vulnerability, agency, and mental health challenges among students. Vulnerability amplifies mental health difficulties, while agency has the potential to mitigate these effects, though its impact depends largely on the surrounding conditions. Recognizing the relationship between these factors is essential for creating effective interventions that address both personal and systemic challenges affecting student well-being. It is imperative for educational institutions to actively engage in addressing these concerns, ensuring that students have access to the necessary support systems to manage vulnerability and build their agency. Additionally, further research should investigate the dynamic interactions between these variables, focusing on actionable strategies to support students' overall success and mental health in higher education settings.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### ***Research Design***

The study utilized a descriptive-quantitative research design to investigate the dynamics of well-being, vulnerability, and agency among students at South Cotabato State College. The descriptive component of the research design established a structured basis for systematically quantifying and characterizing the levels of vulnerability, agency, and mental health challenges among the students. This methodological approach enabled a detailed and scholarly examination of the primary variables investigated in the study (Baron, 2022, 2023; Baron & Cruz, 2023).

Additionally, the research incorporated a correlational component to examine the relationships (Baron, 2024a, 2024b) between vulnerability, agency, and mental health. Hence, analyzing the degree of association among these variables, the study sought to elucidate how vulnerability and agency interact and contribute to mental health outcomes. This dual focus on descriptive and correlational dimensions ensured a robust methodological approach, enabling the investigation of both the prevalence and interconnections of these constructs (Baron, 2024) within the context of a less-resourced educational institution.

### **Locale of the Study**

The study was conducted at South Cotabato State College, a higher education institution located in South Cotabato, Philippines. The college serves a diverse population of students, primarily from regional and less-resourced communities. Its academic programs cater to various disciplines, providing an ideal setting for examining the dynamics of well-being, vulnerability, and agency within a provincial educational context. The locale was selected to address the limited representation of regional institutions in studies on mental health, ensuring that the findings reflect the specific challenges and conditions faced by students in such settings.

### **Respondents and Sampling Techniques**

The study targeted the entire student population of South Cotabato State College, totaling 1,024 individuals. Following the recommendation of Baron and Robles (2023) and employing Cochran's formula for determining sample size in finite populations, a representative sample of 280 respondents was selected. This approach ensured the adequacy and statistical reliability of the sample for the study's objectives. The sample was distributed proportionally across five academic programs to ensure representativeness: Bachelor of Technical Vocational Teacher Education, Bachelor of Science in Agriculture, Bachelor of Science in Tourism Management, Bachelor of Science in Entrepreneurship, and Bachelor of Agricultural Technology. This proportional allocation allowed for an equitable representation of students from each program, ensuring the reliability and validity of the findings within the institutional context.

### **Statistical Treatment**

To achieve the objectives of this study, various statistical tools were employed to analyze the collected data. To determine the level of vulnerability, agency, and mental health challenges among students at South Cotabato State College, the mean was utilized to summarize and interpret the data, providing an overall measure of the respondents' responses.

To examine the relationships between vulnerability and agency, vulnerability and mental health challenges, and agency and mental health challenges, the Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient was utilized. This statistical method was chosen to assess the strength and direction of these associations, particularly given the ordinal nature of the data. As such, this non-parametric test was chosen due to the data not meeting the assumptions of normality, making it more appropriate for assessing monotonic relationships between variables. The analysis was conducted at a 0.05 level of significance to ensure a robust evaluation of the statistical associations between the constructs under study.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The academic environment presents numerous challenges that shape students' experiences, often influencing their well-being and overall performance. Issues such as academic overload, financial insecurity, and limited access to support systems exacerbate vulnerabilities that students face during their college years. In parallel, the extent to which students exercise agency—through self-directed actions, goal orientation, and informed decision-making—can either mitigate or amplify these challenges. Mental health concerns, particularly stress, anxiety, and depression, remain prevalent among students and are often interconnected with the levels of vulnerability and agency they exhibit (Rikala, 2020). The tables that follow provide a detailed analysis of these dimensions, offering a

comprehensive view of their prevalence and relationships within the institutional context.

**Table 1.** Level of Vulnerability among Students at South Cotabato State College

<b>Vulnerability</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Description</b>
Academic	1.03	2.25	Low
Financial	0.80	2.24	Low
Social	0.72	2.09	Low
<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>0.86</b>	<b>2.19</b>	<b>Low</b>

**Legend:** 4.51-5.00 *Very High*; 3.51-4.50 *High*; 2.51-3.50 *Moderate*; 2.49-1.50 *Low*; 1.49-1.00 *Very Low*

The results presented in Table 1 illustrate the levels of vulnerability experienced by students at South Cotabato State College across academic, financial, and social domains, revealing generally low levels of vulnerability. With an overall mean of 2.19, these findings suggest that, although students face challenges, these difficulties do not reach a severity that could significantly impede their academic or personal well-being.

In terms of academic vulnerability, the mean score of 2.25 indicates that most students are able to manage their academic responsibilities without substantial difficulty. However, this suggests that there may be certain students who experience moderate stress or struggle with academic demands, albeit in a limited scope. Financial vulnerability, with a mean of 2.24, reflects that while economic pressures do exist, they are not overwhelmingly detrimental to the students' academic progress. Moreover, social vulnerability, with the lowest mean of 2.09, demonstrates that issues such as social isolation or lack of support are not prevalent or pervasive among the student population.

These findings imply that students are generally able to navigate their academic, financial, and social environments with relative stability. Nevertheless, the presence of variability in academic and financial vulnerability signals the importance of providing targeted support to those who may be at higher risk (Salisbury et al., 2023). Consequently, it would be beneficial for the institution to focus on reinforcing support structures (Hammoudi Halat et al., 2023), particularly in areas where students might experience fluctuations in vulnerability, thereby enhancing their ability to manage these challenges. Furthermore, understanding these vulnerability levels provides a foundation for exploring their potential impact on students' mental health and overall well-being.

**Table 2.** Level of Agency among Students at South Cotabato State College

<b>Agency</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Description</b>
Self-efficacy	0.87	4.03	High
Goal-orientation	0.87	3.89	High
Decision-making ability	0.90	3.96	High
<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>0.88</b>	<b>3.96</b>	<b>High</b>

**Legend:** 4.51-5.00 *Very High*; 3.51-4.50 *High*; 2.51-3.50 *Moderate*; 2.49-1.50 *Low*; 1.49-1.00 *Very Low*

Table 2 reveals that students at South Cotabato State College demonstrate high levels of agency, as indicated by their self-efficacy, goal-orientation, and decision-making ability. The overall mean score of 3.96 reflects a generally strong sense of agency among students, suggesting they are capable of exercising control over their lives and educational experiences.

Self-efficacy, with a mean of 4.03, indicates that students have a high degree of confidence in their ability to achieve academic and personal goals. This sense of personal competence suggests that students believe in their capacity to navigate challenges successfully. Goal-orientation, with a mean of 3.89, points to students' strong motivation to

set and work towards their objectives, reflecting a purposeful approach to their education. Decision-making ability, with a mean score of 3.96, shows that students are generally capable of making informed decisions, indicating their competence in handling decisions that affect their academic and personal outcomes.

These findings suggest that students at South Cotabato State College possess substantial agency, which likely contributes to their ability to navigate various challenges. Such agency may act as a buffer against vulnerability, allowing students to manage stressors more effectively (Cadenas et al., 2021). Consequently, fostering this sense of agency could be beneficial in supporting students' well-being and mental health, as it equips them with the tools to face difficulties proactively and confidently.

**Table 3.** Level of Mental Health Challenges among Students at South Cotabato State College

Mental Health Challenges	SD	Mean	Description
Stress	0.84	2.01	Low
Anxiety	0.82	2.12	Low
Depression	0.81	2.09	Low
<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>0.82</b>	<b>2.07</b>	<b>Low</b>

**Legend:** 4.51-5.00 *Very High*; 3.51-4.50 *High*; 2.51-3.50 *Moderate*; 2.49-1.50 *Low*; 1.49-1.00 *Very Low*

The results in Table 3 reveal that while the levels of mental health challenges among students at South Cotabato State College are generally low, they still require attention. The overall mean score of 2.07 indicates that, on average, students report low levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Stress is particularly low with a mean of 2.01, while anxiety and depression are similarly reported at mean scores of 2.12 and 2.09, respectively.

Although these mental health challenges are not widespread or severe, the presence of such issues, even at low levels, signifies the importance of continuous support for student well-being. Low levels of stress, anxiety, and depression can still affect students' academic performance and overall quality of life. Therefore, it is critical to ensure that mental health resources remain accessible to students, helping to mitigate the potential impact of these challenges and supporting a healthy academic environment (Cage et al., 2021). Addressing these issues proactively can contribute to preventing further mental health deterioration and improving overall student well-being.

**Table 4.** Relationship Between the Level of Vulnerability to the Level of Agency among Students

Variables	Mean	$\rho$ (rho)	Degree of Relationship	p-value	Remark
Vulnerability	2.19	-0.00517	Very Weak	0.9313	No significant relationship
Agency	3.96		Negative		

Tested at 0.05 level of significance

Table 4 shows a very weak negative relationship between vulnerability and agency among students at South Cotabato State College, with a correlation coefficient of -0.00517 and a p-value of 0.9313, indicating no statistically significant relationship. This suggests that the level of vulnerability does not significantly affect students' sense of agency, as measured by their self-efficacy, goal orientation, and decision-making abilities.

The lack of a significant relationship implies that students' vulnerability, encompassing academic, financial, and social stressors, may not directly impair their ability to exercise control or make decisions (Moore et al., 2021; Potter et al., 2020). While this finding contrasts with some literature that links vulnerability to reduced agency, it highlights the

potential for other factors—such as individual resilience or external support systems—to mediate the relationship. Given that students show relatively high levels of agency (mean score of 3.96), further exploration into the broader contextual influences on agency is warranted.

These findings suggest that efforts to enhance students' agency should not be solely focused on mitigating vulnerability but should also address other factors that may contribute to students' overall well-being and decision-making capacities. Further research is needed to explore additional variables that may influence the dynamics between vulnerability and agency.

**Table 5.** Relationship Between the Level of Vulnerability to the Level of Mental Health Challenges among Students

Variables	Mean	$\rho$ (rho)	Degree of Relationship	P-value	Remark
Vulnerability	2.19	0.910	Very Strong Positive	0.000	Significant relationship
Mental Health Challenges	2.07				

Tested at 0.05 level of significance

The data in Table 5 demonstrates a very strong positive correlation between vulnerability and mental health challenges among students at South Cotabato State College, as evidenced by a Spearman's correlation coefficient of 0.910 and a statistically significant p-value of 0.000. This finding indicates that higher levels of vulnerability are strongly associated with an increased likelihood of experiencing mental health challenges, such as stress, anxiety, and depression.

These results point to the necessity of addressing vulnerability factors, including academic, financial, and social challenges, to mitigate their adverse effects on students' mental health (Sheldon et al., 2021). Proactive measures aimed at reducing vulnerability may lead to improvements in students' well-being and overall educational experience (Fassnacht et al., 2022). Implementing comprehensive support systems tailored to address these challenges can contribute to a more supportive learning environment that prioritizes student health and success.

**Table 6.** Relationship Between the Level of Agency to the Level of Mental Health Challenges among Students

Variables	Mean	$\rho$ (rho)	Degree of Relationship	P-value	Remark
Agency	3.96	-0.023	Very Weak Negative	0.699	No significant relationship
Mental Health Challenges	2.07				

Tested at 0.05 level of significance

Table 6 presents the relationship between agency and mental health challenges among students at South Cotabato State College. The correlation coefficient of -0.023 reveals an extremely weak negative association between the two variables, with a p-value of 0.699 indicating that this relationship is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

These findings suggest that, within the context of this study, agency does not substantially influence the mental health challenges faced by students. Despite relatively high levels of agency, as reflected in the mean score of 3.96, it does not appear to serve as a significant determinant in mitigating mental health issues. This lack of a meaningful relationship implies that factors beyond individual agency—such as vulnerability,

environmental stressors, or systemic challenges—are more influential in shaping students' mental health outcomes (Carr, 2023, Frankham et al., 2020). Given the complexity of mental health, future research should consider a broader range of factors and potential mediating variables to better understand the conditions under which agency may or may not play a protective role in mental health.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study provide a thorough examination of the relationships between vulnerability, agency, and mental health challenges among students at South Cotabato State College. Vulnerability, encompassing academic, financial, and social dimensions, presents a significant concern, with students experiencing varying levels of these stressors. The analysis indicates a strong positive relationship between vulnerability and mental health challenges, suggesting that students with higher levels of vulnerability are more likely to experience stress, anxiety, and depression. This connection emphasizes the importance of addressing vulnerability as a key factor influencing mental health outcomes.

Conversely, the study reveals a very weak negative relationship between agency—measured by students' self-efficacy, goal orientation, and decision-making abilities—and mental health challenges. Despite students exhibiting relatively high levels of agency, these personal attributes alone were insufficient to significantly reduce the mental health challenges they face. The findings imply that while agency plays a role in students' academic and personal development, external factors, particularly vulnerability and stressors outside the individual's control, have a more significant impact on their mental health. This complexity emphasizes the need for a multifaceted approach to addressing mental health concerns within educational settings.

The findings emphasize the need for comprehensive support systems within educational institutions to address both vulnerability and mental health challenges. The strong correlation between vulnerability and mental health outcomes suggests that interventions targeting vulnerability, particularly in academic, financial, and social contexts, can improve student well-being. While agency plays a role in personal development, its isolated influence on mental health is limited, indicating that effective interventions should incorporate both individual attributes and the broader environmental factors that affect students.

## **Recommendations**

The findings of this study highlight the substantial impact of vulnerability on the mental health of students, particularly in academic, financial, and social domains. Consequently, it is essential for South Cotabato State College to enhance its support systems addressing these vulnerabilities. Strengthening programs that offer financial assistance, academic counseling, and social support will help alleviate the negative effects of these stressors on students' well-being. Furthermore, improving access to mental health services and ensuring that such services are easily accessible and inclusive is vital to addressing the mental health challenges identified in this study.

Additionally, the study suggests that initiatives aimed at building students' resilience and stress management skills are crucial. While vulnerability is a significant factor in mental health, equipping students with coping mechanisms will enable them to navigate academic pressures more effectively. Offering stress management workshops, resilience-building programs, and peer support networks would serve as preventative measures to help students handle the challenges they face. Moreover, reducing the stigma surrounding mental health through awareness campaigns can foster a more supportive and inclusive

campus environment.

The study also indicates that agency, despite its weaker relationship with mental health, still holds potential for positive impact. Strengthening students' self-efficacy and decision-making skills could empower them to better manage mental health challenges. Programs focused on goal-setting, leadership training, and personal development could help foster greater autonomy and self-regulation, which may in turn support students in overcoming mental health challenges. Integrating such programs into the academic curriculum could further enhance students' ability to manage various life challenges.

Creating a supportive and inclusive campus culture is also critical to reducing the social isolation that contributes to vulnerability and mental health issues. Providing spaces for social interaction, promoting extracurricular activities, and implementing mentorship programs can help build stronger connections among students, which in turn can reduce feelings of isolation. Encouraging positive relationships between students, faculty, and staff will foster a sense of belonging, which is integral to promoting student well-being.

Finally, the study emphasizes the importance of ongoing research to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions designed to improve student well-being. Regular assessments will ensure that existing support systems remain effective and responsive to the changing needs of students. Future research could explore additional factors influencing mental health, such as cultural and environmental influences, in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges students face.

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