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Graduate Schooling Discontinuance: Triggers and Coping Mechanisms of Dropouts and Returnees

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Abstract

Graduate school discontinuance remains a persistent concern among working professionals in rural higher education contexts. This descriptive study examined the triggers of graduate school discontinuance and the coping mechanisms of dropouts and returnees at Cagayan State University–Aparri during School Year 2025–2026. Data were gathered from thirty purposively selected respondents using a structured survey questionnaire. Findings revealed that financial constraints were the primary cause of discontinuance, while personal, academic, and institutional factors exerted relatively less influence. Among returnees, major challenges included workload adjustment, work–study balance, thesis completion, and readmission processes. Despite these difficulties, returnees demonstrated effective coping mechanisms such as time management, mentoring, family and peer support, career-driven motivation, and personal resilience. The results highlight the importance of flexible academic policies, responsive administrative processes, and strengthened support systems to enhance graduate student retention and facilitate successful re-engagement among returning learners in rural higher education institutions.

Keywords: graduate school discontinuance; graduate school dropouts; returnees; coping mechanisms; student retention; higher

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is a world-wide method of sustainable development, economic expansion and human empowerment. However, UNESCO states that as of 2023, 235 million students are engaged in higher education worldwide and due to master's levels study dropout is common especially where academic challenges collide with financial and socio-economics concerns (UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2022). This challenges the maintenance of

high-skilled labor force requirements for knowledge-based economies and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 for inclusive, equitable education.

Internationally, graduate attainment is only at 66% with funding and advising and research issues causing drop out (OECD, 2022). Therefore, it's not surprising that in the Philippines these problems

lead to low retention and attainment with academic pressure, funding and too much requirement (CHED, 2022; World Bank, 2021). This is especially true of certain areas than others with a region like Northern Cagayan being more rural than urban, without graduate educational institutions available to them, online learning opportunities and scholarship availability, it's more likely that stop out will occur.

Cagayan State University-Aparri serves many professional degree students who continue to master's degrees for career advancement but are left with a backlogged thesis, no funding for reenrollment, and little institutional support. Some are forced to quit for good, others come back years later and want to incorporate some methods not included in previously conducted research through local studies. The context of the problem is that there is a large number of graduate students, and other students may pause their studies and return later. This may also include students who have chronicled the reasons for the discontinuance of their studies and students who return and face obstacles, as well as their coping strategies and mechanisms.

This study aims to fill the gap in research concerning the factors behind discontinuance and strategies for resiliency regarding returnees of CSU Aparri graduate school returnees. Becker's (1993) Human Capital Theory is the foundational theory applied to generalize the findings from the gathered data for the sake of institutional awareness, policymaking and implementing efforts to increase graduate retention and graduation rates.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study aims to investigate the triggers that lead to graduate schooling discontinuance and the coping mechanisms employed by dropouts and returnees at Cagayan State University-Aparri (CSU Aparri) during the School Year 2025–2026.

Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the profile characteristics of graduate students who discontinued their studies and those who eventually returned in terms of:
 - a. age
 - b. sex
 - c. marital status
 - d. employment status
 - e. field of specialization
 - f. year level
2. What is the extent of the following triggers of graduate school discontinuance do the Graduate School dropouts experience?
 - a. personal factors
 - b. academic factors
 - c. financial factors
 - d. social and institutional factors
3. What are the challenges encountered by the Graduate School returnees and their coping mechanisms to manage it?
4. What insights and recommendations can be drawn from the experiences of graduate school dropouts and returnees to strengthen student support and retention strategies?

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study focuses on examining the triggers and coping mechanisms of graduate school dropouts and returnees at Cagayan State University- Aparri Campus during the academic year 2025 - 2026. It is limited to master's level students, particularly those enrolled in the Master of Arts in Education program, who experienced at least one semester of discontinuance before deciding to return. The research emphasizes individual, financial, academic, professional, and institutional factors that contributed to their temporary withdrawal as well as the strategies they adopted to cope with such difficulties and maintain their re-engagement in graduate studies. Undergraduate students, doctoral candidates, and graduate students from other CSU campuses are excluded, as their circumstances may vary. While broader economic or policy-related issues may influence discontinuance, the study delimits itself to the localized context of CSU - with vivid experiences of enormous and its graduate learner's students, with the findings to provide relevant insights rather than universal generalization.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Triggers and Determinants of Graduate School Discontinuance

Graduate school dropouts happen under a multitude of educational, institutional, personal and socio-economic pressures compounding over time. But from an institutional perspective, where the strongest impulse for continued retention emerges, it makes sense that a lack of support from the institution brings students to the decision to drop out. For example, Glorieux et al. (2024) and Hurtado et al. (2024) note the three top reasons to leave include input of no guidance, too much workload and no guidance to inspire positivity. In the same sense, Valencia Quecano et al. (2024) find that if an institution doesn't care enough or have enough programming to help, the student isn't convinced to remain - Alisic et al. (2024) illustrate this as a "move" crisis, a failure of others to make moves for you so you forget how to make them for yourself. Moreover, Bekova et al. (2025) imply that first impressions are everything, and if no standards are in place from the beginning, students become complacent and apathetic. Therefore, dropping out is not a choice but a failure to live up to standards set from institutional and structural expectations of programs and supports.

However, even beyond the institutional mediator, psychosocial and socioeconomic stressors create a propensity to drop out. For example, Glorieux et al. (2024) stipulate that research drops off, limited time and emotional exhaustion are the three top ranking internal factors that contribute to degree status noncompletion while Bekova et al. (2025) include psychological complications, like impostor syndrome, emotional exhaustion, anxiety and social support complications. The latter two are more problematic for graduate students - especially those working or parenting - and financial stressors muddy the waters. For example, Hurtado et al. 2024 show that Valencia Quecano et al. (2024) and Alisic et al. (2024) note that students experiencing financial stressors shift their focus from academia to work. Beckova et al. (2025) reveal that students who experience financial stressors increasingly over time have low loan repayment rates and thus when these stresses, in an institutional fashion promoted through loan repayment, serve as a means of motivation to not finish, it makes sense to dropout. Therefore, in reading between the lines of these investigations, graduate dropout occurs as a confluence of academic, psychological, socioeconomic stresses and thus institutional change in the arena of mentorship, flexibility and funding

resources are necessary to encourage sustained motivation through completion.

Coping Mechanisms and Adaptation Strategies of Dropouts

Coping mechanisms are needed for graduate students who must adapt to psychological and sociological consequences of discontinuation. Emotion- and problem-focused coping techniques to re-establish control include mindfulness, cognitive reframing and self-regulation (Montenegro, 2022; Ely et al., 2022). Resilience and emotional regulation in the face of loss offset stress (Emerson et al., 2022; Henaku et al., 2024) and an evolved adaptive sense of control safeguards self-efficacy (Yusof et al., 2023). In the end, coping is not avoidance, but evolution; learners can divert their focus and reframe the meaning of this experience, transforming failure into perspective and psychological re-equilibration. Therefore, they fall victim to emotional distress - or reflection - for overcoming their dropout status through reintegration.

Social and behavioral coping then converts challenges into developmental opportunity. For instance, according to Ely et al. (2022) and Montenegro (2022), peer support systems, mentorship and community engagement provide social connections and responsibilities that promote belonging. Henaku et al. (2024) and Emerson et al. (2022) observe how social connectedness reduces loneliness and increases empowerment. Simultaneously, from a more behavioral perspective, Montenegro (2022) and Yusof et al. (2023) note that cognitive restructuring and positive thinking enable people to view stopping from sport as merely a pause while Emerson et al. (2022) links routine and organization to stabilization efforts. Ultimately, stepping back to reassess one's goals, according to Ely et al. (2022) and Henaku et al. (2024), restores agency and optimism. Therefore, coping is the all-encompassing form of emotional stabilization, social connectedness and cognitive reframing that transforms the individual, in addition to the readiness to return.

Reintegration and Resilience of Graduate School Returnees

Resilience is learned by these previously drop-out students in their time away from the classroom due to stressors of life. Resilience is developed based on ecological conditions based on personal, familial and institutional developments (Sheng et al., 2025). Therefore, according to Nguyen (2022) and Banda et al. (2025), many returners after their first entrance into the classroom have a better sense of self-determination and competence because they have the time away from the classroom to think about their past experiences in the classroom. Likewise, Cunningham et al. (2024) and Grosa et al. (2022) agree that those with jobs and a certain level of emotional stability and flexibility can better cope with the stressors that make them drop out in the first place. Ultimately, resilience is learned, a continual, dynamic process over time. Time away changes one's focus and level of understanding when returning to the educational environment, giving them a different level of understanding and intention.

Successful reintegration outcomes rests on the integration of institutional flexibility and social support. Flexible admission criteria, administrative support, and supportive program participation encourage students to return (Nguyen, 2022; Sheng et al., 2025). Peer support and encouragement from family members also helps to level stigma and restore confidence (Banda et al., 2025; Cunningham et al., 2024). Grosa et al. (2022) also argue that overcoming fragmentation of scholarly self and value alignment on sustained effort with the goals framework deepens commitment.

Reintegration involves more than just reentry; it includes reconstruction of self and situational purpose, which active leavers supported by responsive institutions and robust social networks transform stagnation into growth and fulfillment.

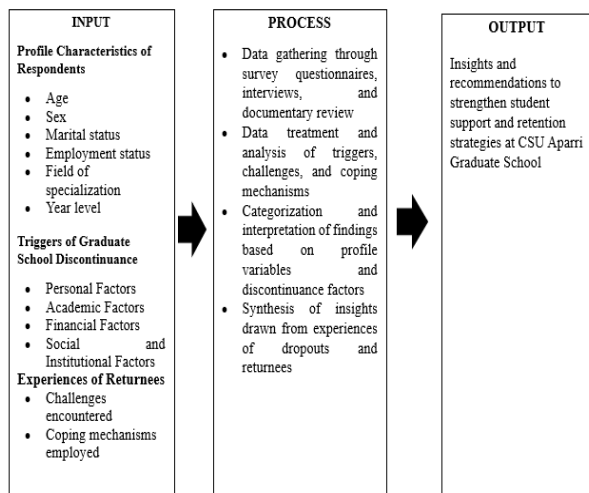
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper utilizes two complementing theoretical dynamics, which are Tinto's Student Integration Theory and Resilience Theory. Together, these theories rationalize why some graduate students discontinue their studies, how they manage the discontinuance, and why some are able to return and reintegrate into the educational framework seamlessly.

According to Tinto's Student Integration Theory, persistence in higher education is also impacted by the level of integration with the curriculum of the institution and the level of cohesion, for example, in the case of faculty integration, scholarly engagement, performance, and relationships with faculty/supervisors while with social integration, there is an overlap concerning peers, as well as a feeling of belonging and other social support networks. Students who experience Supervisory and guidance support deficit, coursework burden, in particular excessive workload, financial problems, and social deficit, are all likely to have low social integration which is likely to lead to dropping out. Therefore, in the case of this study, the application of Tinto's perspective will aid in clarifying and examining the causes and factors of discontinuance and the conditions for appropriate reintegration of returnees into the graduate study.

Resilience Theory encompasses a range of psychological phenomena that pertain to the capacity of individuals to adapt positively despite the presence of formidable challenges, stressors, or traumatic events. Graduate students who dropouts exercise resilience as they cope by finding jobs, reframing obstacles, and proactively building social support to mitigate the emotional toll of leaving school. Conversely, those who return to the academic system exercise resiliency, as they cope with the reengagement of self-efficacy, in addition to relearning the institutional expectations and academic expectations. Hence, this theory of resilience underpins this inquiry of how dropouts and returners frame ultimate graduation as the goal and strategically deployed coping mechanisms to persist despite taking divergent paths, and the sheer determination, to graduate.

Together, these two theories presented assist in defining the study's theoretical framework by illustrating that a lack of integration at the institutional level creates gaps that result in discontinuance, while those who effectively cope with resilience either disconnect from graduate experience and reintegrate or reintegrate back into the system. The study, thus, connects more institutional, explainable approaches to discontinuance and intentions of reintegration to personal, more adaptive responses to sharpen understanding of graduate school discontinuance, resilience, and reintegration.



This research is based on the **Input-Process-Output (IPO) Model** which offers an ordered structure to the flow of the research based on its primary elements and ultimate goals. The IPO Model describes the way in which raw data in the form of the respondents' profiles, discontinuance triggers, and returnee experiences are processed and analyzed to produce further understanding and actionable recommendations to enhance the retention and support systems for graduate students at the CSU Aparri Graduate School.

The **input** consists of the profile characteristics of the respondents including age, sex, marital status, employment status, field of specialization and year level. Also, the triggers of graduate school discontinuance such as personal factors, academic factors, financial factors and social and institutional factors. Lastly, the experiences of the respondents highlighting their challenges encountered and coping mechanism they employed.

The **process** includes the data process that will be employed throughout the study, such as administering the questionnaire, utilizing data treatment analysis, interpretation of data and drawn results. Lastly, the **output** consists of the insights and recommendations to strengthen the student support and coping strategies at Cagayan State University Aparri-Campus Graduate School.

Through this IPO model, the study provides a logical and reasonable flow of assessed factors of graduate school breakage grounded toward formulations of retention and re-entrance solutions. It demonstrates how students' contextual lives relate to the institution's and, when complemented with thorough academic research, yield viable solutions toward graduate students' retention and degree completion.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study will utilize a **descriptive research design** to examine the triggers of graduate schooling discontinuance and the coping mechanisms of dropouts and returnees at Cagayan State University-Aparri during the School Year 2025-2026. A descriptive design is appropriate as the purpose of such a design in research is to examine and depict 'as is the prevailing conditions, behaviors, and perceptions of individuals without the intervention of the researcher. The **descriptive variables** include the personal, academic, financial, and social or institutional factors influencing

discontinuance, as well as the challenges and coping strategies of returnees.

Locale of the Study

This study will be conducted at **Cagayan State University-Aparri (CSU-Aparri)**, situated in Barangay Maura, Aparri, Cagayan. The campus offers undergraduate and graduate programs and caters to professionals and educators from various municipalities in Northern Cagayan. Its Graduate School provides advanced academic and professional training through programs such as Doctor of Philosophy in Education major in Educational Management, Master of Arts in Education major in Educational Management, Master of Arts in Education major in English, Master of Science in Information Technology, and Master of Science in Teaching Mathematics.

Respondents and Sampling Procedure

The respondents of this study will consist of **graduate students of Cagayan State University-Aparri** who have either discontinued their studies or have returned after a period of absence during the School Year 2025-2026. They comprise former students who had a temporary enrolment lapse from any Graduate School program, and those who had a re-enrolment to finish or to complete the degree. They will be crucial for the information about the causes of graduate school discontinuance, the problems faced by returnees, and the strategies used to address those problems.

For the purpose of this study, **graduate school dropouts** are operationally defined as students who were formerly enrolled in any Graduate School Program at CSU-Aparri and who have voluntarily dropped out for a minimum of one academic term, not having fulfilled their graduation requirements and not having returned to enrollment status at the time of data collection.

On the other hand, **graduate school returnees** are operationally defined as students who have dropped out of graduate studies for a minimum of one academic term, but who have returned to enrollment status in either the same or another Graduate School Program at CSU-Aparri for the purpose of completing their degrees.

A purposive sampling technique will be employed in selecting the respondents. This method is deemed appropriate because it allows the researcher to intentionally include participants who have specific experiences directly relevant to the study objectives. The list of potential participants will be obtained from the official records of the Graduate School of CSU-Aparri and will be cross-verified with the program chairs to ascertain their status as dropouts or returnees. A total of 30 respondents will be the targeted, comprising 15 graduate school dropouts and 15 graduate from school returnees.

The **inclusion criteria** will encompass graduate students at CSU-Aparri, both those currently or previously enrolled in any graduate programs of the university and have experienced at least one period of discontinuance. Only individuals who actively agree to participate and provide informed consent will be included. The exclusion criteria will apply to those who are continuously enrolled, those enrolled in another CSU campus or in other higher education institutions, and those who drop out utilizing and those who fail to give full responses.

Research Instrument

This study intends to utilize **two structured survey questionnaires** developed by the researcher to gather quantitative

and descriptive data on the triggers of graduate school discontinuance, challenges of returnees, and their coping mechanisms. Both instruments are aligned in the **Statement of the Problem** to ensure that each component is relevant to the study's variables. The first questionnaire, intended for **graduate school dropouts**, consists of two parts: the respondents' profile (age, sex, marital status, employment status, program enrolled, and units completed) and the triggers of discontinuance covering personal, academic, financial, and social or institutional factors. Responses will be rated using a **five-point Likert scale** ranging from 5 – Very High Extent to 1 – Least Extent.

The second questionnaire, designed for **graduate school returnees**, includes three parts: the respondents' profile, the challenges encountered upon reentry, and the coping mechanisms employed to sustain their studies. The second part measures the extent of academic, motivational, financial, and institutional challenges, while the third part assesses the frequency of coping behaviors such as seeking mentorship, time management, self-care, and peer support. A **five-point scale** will be used, with agreement ratings for challenges and frequency ratings for coping mechanisms.

Both instruments will undergo **expert validation** by specialists in educational management and research to ensure content accuracy, clarity, and reliability. Revisions will be made based on expert feedback prior to pilot testing and administration. The validated questionnaires will then serve as the **primary data-gathering tools**, generating empirical results that explain the causes of discontinuance, the challenges faced by returnees, and the coping strategies that foster persistence in graduate education.

Data Gathering Procedure

After the approval of the research proposal, the researcher will secure the necessary consent from Dean of Graduate School and Campus Executive Officer of CSU Aparri to conduct the study. A formal letter of request stating the study objectives and the relevance of the study in enhancing support mechanisms for, and retention of, graduate students will be submitted. For approved request, the researchers will coordinate with program chairs and heads of departments to determine and verify the pool of potential respondents who have withdrawn or returned to graduate studies.

The research instrument preparation and administration will occur according to a logical sequence in an organized way to ease the process, which assists in categorizing responses appropriately. Execution of the study will be carried out in pre-allocated time slots for maximum convenience as far as data collection is concerned for this project. Before sending out research instruments to the whole sample, the design researcher will conduct a short online orientation with potential respondents. This orientation will acquaint the volunteer respondents with the objectives of the study, with the components of the questionnaire that they are to respond to, and with its voluntary nature. Participation will be voluntary; the data will remain confidential, and the use of that data will be strict for academic purposes. Each respondent to the survey will sign an informed consent.

Statistical Treatment of Data

The study will primarily employ **descriptive statistics**. Descriptive statistics will be used in this study to present and analyze the quantitative data gathered from school year 2025-2026 graduate school dropouts and returnees of Cagayan State University-Aparri.

Statistical methods will enable the research to be organized, described, and assessed within the contexts of the study's aims.

The demographic or profile of the respondents, including their ages, sex, marital status, employment status, field of specialization, and year level, will be summarized using frequency counts and percentage distributions. These scores will reflect the participants' demographic and academic profile details.

To determine the level of triggers influencing discontinuation in postgraduate studies from the perspective of personal, academic, financial, and social/institutional factors, weighted means and standard deviations will be analyzed. The outcomes will indicate the strength and direction of responses from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Likewise, the tools will be utilized to determine the problems encountered by graduate school returnees, and the levels of their experiences with these following academic returns.

The coping strategies used by graduate school returnees will also be examined based on the frequency, percentage, and weighted mean to investigate how frequently they practiced these coping strategies. It will be placed on a 5-point frequency scale from "Very High Extent" (5) to "Least Extent" (1). To adhere to consistent interpretation of data, the five-point Likert scales used with their equivalent descriptive meanings will be applied in data analysis.

Scale	Range	Descriptive Interpretation
5	4.20 – 5.00	Very High Extent
4	3.40 – 4.19	High Extent
3	2.60 – 3.39	Moderate Extent
2	1.80 – 2.59	Far Extent
1	1.00 – 1.79	Least Extent

All quantitative data will be encoded, tabulated, and statistically analyzed using appropriate software to ensure accuracy and reliability of computation.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the study, the researcher will adhere to established ethical principles that ensure respect for participants' rights, dignity, and welfare. The collection of data shall first be made upon written consent of the Dean, Graduate School, and the Campus Executive Officer of Cagayan State University-Aparri. The researcher will not start the process of data collection until the permission is granted.

Participation is voluntary and will not involve compulsion or pressure of any kind. Respondents will receive an Informed Consent Form explaining the aims of the study, what methods will be used, how long their participation in this project will last, and that they can leave the study at any time without penalty. The same study also specifies that there are minimal risks involved, and all data collected will only be used for academic purposes.

To support the participants' right to confidentiality, names will not be requested in the questionnaires, and all information collected will be anonymized and kept in a secure location. Only the researcher and the academic adviser will have access to the original

data. The data will be reported in aggregate so that no individual participants can be discerned. The major ethical principles that will be respected throughout all the stages of this research will be informed voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, and beneficence. This research will observe the research ethics standards of Cagayan State University, alongside the principles outlined in the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Graduate School Dropouts and Returnees at CSU–Aparri (SY 2025–2026)

Table 1 presents the consolidated demographic profile of graduate school dropouts and returnees at CSU–Aparri during the School Year 2025–2026. The data allow a direct comparison between the two groups across age, sex, marital status, employment status, program enrolled, and units earned prior to discontinuance or re-enrollment.

Profile Variable	Category	Dropouts (f=15)	%	Returnees (f=15)	%	Total (N=30)	%
Age	23–24	5	33.3	4	26.7	9	30.0
	25–26	6	40.0	5	33.3	11	36.7
	27 and above	4	26.7	6	40.0	10	33.3
Sex	Male	5	33.3	6	40.0	11	36.7
	Female	10	66.7	9	60.0	19	63.3
Marital Status	Single	11	73.3	9	60.0	20	66.7
	Married	4	26.7	6	40.0	10	33.3
Employment Status	Full-time	7	46.7	7	46.7	14	46.7
	Part-time	3	20.0	6	40.0	9	30.0
	Self-employed	4	26.7	1	6.7	5	16.7
	Unemployed	1	6.7	1	6.7	2	6.7
Program Enrolled	MAED	10	66.7	8	53.3	18	60.0
	MAENG	3	20.0	2	13.3	5	16.7
	MST	1	6.7	0	0.0	1	3.3
	MSIT	1	6.7	5	33.3	6	20.0
Units Earned	0–9 units	5	33.3	5	33.3	10	33.3
	10–18 units	2	13.3	3	20.0	5	16.7
	19–27 units	6	40.0	4	26.7	10	33.3
	28–36 units	2	13.3	2	13.3	4	13.3
	37 and above	0	0.0	1	6.7	1	3.3

Table 2.1. Extent of Personal Factors as Triggers of Graduate School Discontinuance

Table 2.1. suggests that personal factors were not generally a major trigger of graduate school discontinuance, as shown by an overall descriptive value of Far Extent. This implies that health problems, family responsibilities, loss of motivation, and lifestyle changes were not strong influences in discontinuance decisions. However, time management issues between work and school commitments emerged as a significant concern, and moderate levels of emotional exhaustion and shifting personal priorities may still contribute to discontinuance when combined with other academic and work-related pressures.

Personal Factors	Mean	Descriptive value
1. I experienced health problems that affected my studies.	2.07	Far Extent
2. I had difficulty balancing studies with family responsibilities.	2.07	Far Extent
3. I lost motivation to continue my	2.53	Far Extent

graduate schooling.		
4. I struggled with time management in juggling work and school.	3.60	High Extent
5. I felt emotionally or mentally exhausted during my studies.	2.73	Moderate Extent
6. I prioritized other personal goals over continuing graduate school.	2.87	Moderate Extent
7. I encountered lifestyle changes (marriage, relocation, etc.) that hindered my studies.	2.20	Far Extent
Total	2.58	Far Extent

Table 2.2. Extent of Academic Factors as Triggers of Graduate School Discontinuance

Table 2.2 shows that academic factors were generally not a main trigger of graduate school discontinuance. The overall descriptive value is Far Extent. This might suggest that issues on the academic side of graduate school, including academic requirements, instruction quality, and academic support were not strong causes of discontinuance of study for the respondents. However, the perception of some elements such as heavy workload, deadline pressure, and moderate difficulty of thesis or dissertation requirements also suggests that some elements of academic challenges in graduate school create stress among students and may become a cause for discontinuance, especially when other factors also set in.

Academic Factors	Mean	Descriptive value
1. I found the academic workload overwhelming.	3.47	High Extent
2. I had difficulty understanding complex academic requirements.	2.40	Far Extent
3. I was dissatisfied with the quality of instruction.	1.80	Far Extent
4. I had challenges meeting deadlines and requirements.	3.13	Moderate Extent
5. I felt that academic expectations were too demanding.	2.17	Far Extent
6. I struggled with thesis/dissertation preparation and requirements.	2.80	Moderate Extent
7. I lacked academic support or mentoring from professors.	2.00	Far Extent
Total	2.55	Far Extent

Table 2.3. Extent of Financial Factors as Triggers of Graduate School Discontinuance

Table 2.3 shows financial factors were a moderate trigger of graduate school discontinuance. Respondents had different levels of agreement on the statements about tuition expenses, living expenses, family financial responsibilities, and unavailability of scholarships or financial aid, with some statements being more salient than others. The overall result can be interpreted as that a prolonged financial burden was a significant factor in interrupting graduate studies and highlights the need for institutional support and flexible payment schemes for graduate students in the form of scholarships and other financial assistance.

Financial Factors	Mean	Descriptive value
1. I found tuition fees too expensive.	2.80	Moderate Extent
2. I struggled to manage transportation and living expenses while studying.	2.73	Moderate Extent
3. I prioritized family financial needs over my education.	2.87	Moderate Extent
4. I lacked scholarships or financial assistance.	3.33	Moderate Extent
5. I lost my source of income during my studies.	2.47	Far Extent
6. I encountered unexpected financial emergencies that forced me to stop.	2.60	Moderate Extent
7. I considered graduate schooling a financial burden.	2.27	Far Extent
Total	2.72	Moderate Extent

Table 2.4. Extent of Social and Institutional Factors as Triggers of Graduate School Discontinuance

Table 2.4 Social and institutional factors were generally not a major cause of graduate school discontinuance. The overall descriptive value is Far Extent. This may suggest that issues related to belongingness, peer support, institutional communication, and fairness were not strongly perceived as factors that interrupt graduate studies. However, the presence of conflicts between class schedules and work commitments and the moderately agree level also suggest that structural constraints rather than social and institutional relationships are important in affecting persistence in graduate school. This points to the need for more flexible scheduling for working graduate students.

Social and Institutional Factors		
Statements	Mean	Descriptive value
1. I did not feel a strong sense of belonging in the graduate school community.	2.47	Far Extent
2. I felt a lack of support from peers or classmates.	2.20	Far Extent
3. I perceived graduate school policies as rigid and unsupportive.	2.07	Far Extent
4. I encountered conflicts between class schedules and work commitments.	3.40	High Extent
5. I experienced limited access to school resources (library, labs, etc.).	2.13	Far Extent
6. I found communication and advice from the institution inadequate.	1.93	Far Extent
7. I was discouraged by perceived favoritism or unfair treatment.	1.87	Far Extent
Total	2.30	Far Extent

Table 3.1. Challenges Encountered by Graduate School Returnees Upon Re-engagement

Table 3.1 shows that graduate school returnees strongly experienced challenges upon re-engagement. The overall descriptive value is Very High Extent. This suggests that coming back to graduate studies involves significant academic, emotional, and structural difficulties, particularly with thesis requirements, catching up with peers' progress, and institutional readmission requirements. The challenges on workload adjustment, time constraint, and adaptation to new academic environments further highlight the need for structured reintegration support, academic guidance, and psychosocial assistance to help returnees sustain their studies.

Statements	Mean	Descriptive value
1. Adjusting again to the academic workload after a long break	4.20	Very High Extent
2. Catching up with revised curricula, policies, and requirements.	3.87	High Extent
3. Rebuilding study habits and academic discipline.	4.13	High Extent
4. Managing self-doubt and fear of repeating past failures.	4.07	High Extent
5. Balancing family responsibilities with graduate school commitments.	4.20	Very High Extent
6. Coping with limited time due to work and school schedules.	4.20	Very High Extent
7. Facing financial strain while trying to sustain studies.	4.13	High Extent
8. Dealing with pressure to complete thesis/dissertation requirements.	4.27	Very High Extent
9. Experiencing lack of encouragement from family, peers, or colleagues.	4.33	Very High Extent
10. Reintegrating into a younger or more advanced peer group.	4.20	Very High Extent
11. Feeling left behind compared to classmates who did not discontinue.	4.73	Very High Extent
12. Handling institutional requirements for re-admission or readjustment.	4.53	Very High Extent
13. Adjusting to new faculty members and teaching approaches.	4.47	Very High Extent
14. Limited access to academic resources and references.	4.00	High Extent
15. Struggling with technology requirements (online classes, digital platforms).	3.80	High Extent
Total	4.21	Very High Extent

Table 3.2. Coping Mechanisms Employed by Graduate School Returnees in Managing Re-engagement Challenges

Table 3.2 shows that graduate school returnees strongly employed coping mechanisms to manage re-engagement challenges. The overall descriptive value is Very High Extent. This means that returnees to graduate school mostly relied on adaptive strategies such as effective time management, family and peer support, utilization of digital resources, and career-driven motivation, with resilience and positive mindset playing a key role. This

underscores the importance of institutional support in strengthening adaptive coping strategies to help promote sustained enrollment and successful degree completion.

Statements	Mean	Descriptive value
1. Seeking guidance and mentorship from professors or advisers.	4.13	High Extent
2. Establishing a structured study schedule and time management plan.	4.47	Very High Extent
3. Prioritizing tasks and breaking down workload into manageable steps.	4.20	Very High Extent
4. Strengthening family communication and support systems.	4.60	Very High Extent
5. Joining peer study groups or forming academic networks.	4.40	Very High Extent
6. Utilizing online resources and digital tools for learning.	4.40	Very High Extent
7. Applying for scholarships, grants, or financial aid.	3.53	High Extent
8. Practicing self-care to maintain physical and mental health.	4.20	Very High Extent
9. Drawing motivation from career advancement goals.	4.67	Very High Extent
10. Developing resilience through positive mindset and perseverance.	4.80	Very High Extent
Total	4.34	Very High Extent

CONCLUSION

This study found that graduate schooling discontinuance at CSU–Aparri is primarily driven by financial constraints, work–study conflicts, and multiple life demands, particularly among working professionals enrolled in the MA in Education major in Educational Management. Although returnees experienced academic adjustment difficulties and continued work and family pressures upon re-engagement, they demonstrated resilience by utilizing time management strategies, academic support, family and peer encouragement, digital resources, and career motivation. Overall, discontinuance was influenced by financial and work-related pressures, while persistence was sustained through adaptive coping mechanisms.

RECOMMENDATION

Considering the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Graduate School Administration and University Officials should implement flexible academic policies, including hybrid learning, adaptable schedules, and extended timelines for thesis and dissertation completion to support working students.
2. The Graduate School should strengthen financial support through installment tuition schemes, emergency assistance, and expanded scholarship or grant access to reduce financial pressures.
3. Faculty Members and Academic Advisers should enhance mentoring through regular consultations, structured progress monitoring, timely feedback, and proactive advising, particularly for mid-program students.
4. Faculty Members should demonstrate flexibility and sensitivity by allowing reasonable deadline adjustments, maintaining clear communication, and providing supportive supervision.
5. Graduate School Returnees and Current Students should sustain adaptive coping strategies through effective time management, active adviser consultations, peer collaboration, and use of digital learning resources.
6. Student Support Services and Guidance Counselors should provide structured reintegration programs, including returnee orientations, psychosocial counseling, and resilience-building workshops.

7. Future Researchers should broaden investigations using larger samples, multi-campus settings, and qualitative or mixed method approaches to deepen understanding of graduate school discontinuance and reintegration.

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