



WHY I FAILED: THE TRUTHS BEHIND STUDENT SELF-HANDICAPPING

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Abstract:

This qualitative study examined self-handicapping among engineering students at the largest non-sectarian private university in Mindanao. Ten participants were selected for in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion. The thematic analyses revealed four primary reasons why students engage in self-handicapping: academic self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy, external blaming, justification through duties and obligation, and burnout. Interestingly, the findings highlight that self-handicapping is not just a behavior, action, or emotion but a mindset. This emphasizes the need for interventions that target both the behavioral, emotional, and mental aspects of self-handicapping. Schools should implement time management training, mental health support, and coping skills programs to help students adopt healthier academic habits and improve their overall well-being and academic success.

Keywords: education, student self-handicapping, academic performance, Philippines

1. Introduction

Academic failure remains a growing concern in educational settings, often leaving students overwhelmed, discouraged, and uncertain of ways to recover (Gutiérrez-de-Rozas *et al.*, 2022). In many cases, this repeated failure pushes students to adopt self-defeating strategies such as procrastination, task avoidance, and excuse-making not out of laziness, but as a means of protecting their fragile sense of self-worth (Schwinger *et al.*, 2022). The same study says that these patterns, drawn from lived experiences, reveal a

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trouble cycle: the more students try to shield themselves from failure, the more they fall behind, both academically and emotionally. This presents a serious problem in understanding how self-handicapping directly contributes to academic failure by disrupting students' motivation, diminishing effort, and impairing performance (Jafari *et al.*, 2024).

Numerous studies have proven that students use self-handicapping as a coping strategy in response to academic failure. Jia *et al.* (2021) found that students used self-handicapping to cope with academic anxiety, often by procrastinating to protect their self-esteem, which led to increased stress levels and further impaired academic performance. Results show that while these tactics offered temporary relief, students eventually recognized the need to make up for their shortcomings (Erezo *et al.*, 2020). When students perceive a subject as overly difficult, they may develop negative attitudes that trigger self-handicapping, reducing their motivation to exert effort and ultimately harming their academic performance (Rotairo *et al.*, 2015). A tendency to avoid challenging situations, coupled with self-handicapping behaviors, ultimately prevents them from effectively addressing and fulfilling their obligations as students (Fhadli *et al.*, 2021). Boruchovitch *et al.* (2022) and Ganda *et al.* (2015) found clear evidence and documented similar behaviors among students in Brazilian public universities, particularly in teacher education programs, where participants admitted to neglecting theoretical readings, skipping classes, and showing minimal effort in academic activities.

In the Philippine context, Endiape and Hermosa (2023) found that students from Godofredo M. Tan Integrated School of Arts and Trades in San Narciso District faced performance issues linked to behavioral self-handicapping factors like household responsibilities, poor health, and heavy workloads. In addition, Ngo *et al.* (2024) shared that procrastination—specifically *doing things in the last minute*—and self-esteem are significant predictors of self-handicapping among dean's listers.

This study is significant as it aims to explore the underlying causes of academic failure by focusing on students' self-handicapping behaviors. Academic failure often stems not from a lack of ability or interest, but from emotional struggles and fear of failure, which prompt students to use self-defeating strategies such as procrastination, excuse-making, and task avoidance—behaviors that provide short-term self-esteem protection but ultimately harm both their academic performance and emotional well-being (Hou & Zhang, 2024). Understanding self-handicapping is crucial for educators, counsellors, and school administrators, as it enables early detection of these coping mechanisms and informs targeted support to help students manage stress, build resilience, and engage more positively with their learning.

Many studies have looked at self-handicapping, which includes things like procrastinating, making excuses, or avoiding schoolwork. But most of these studies only talk about these behaviors before students fail. They did not focus on what happens after students experience academic failure. Thus, this study looked at self-handicapping from the viewpoint of students who already gone through academic failure. These students often used self-handicapping not just to avoid effort but to protect their self-esteem and cope with emotional exhaustion. They might have said things like *I was tired* or *had other*

responsibilities to explain poor performance, despite being aware of their fear and doubt. By fully grasping the complexities of self-handicapping, one can better understand its long-term implications on students' academic performance and emotional well-being. Given the rising concern over academic failure, addressing the underlying causes is essential to those who have failed to get a deeper look at the real reasons behind self-handicapping. It is not always laziness; it can be a survival strategy. This deeper understanding can empower educators and counsellors to cultivate more supportive and effective learning environments.

The purpose of this study was to examine the reasons behind students' self-handicapping. By exploring how students perceive, justify, and implement self-handicapping behaviors, this research aimed to gain deeper insight into the internal thought processes that drive such habits and their long-term impacts on their academic performance and emotional well-being. In line with Sustainable Development Goal 3: Good Health and Well-Being and Goal 4: Quality Education, the findings can help guide the development of more effective interventions and support strategies, fostering a healthier, more supportive, and more inclusive learning environment where all students can thrive academically and personally.

2. Material and Methods

2.1 Research Participants and Instrument

The participants of this study were 10 students from the College of Engineering Education in the largest non-sectarian private university in Mindanao, enrolled in the academic year 2024-2025, who failed at least one minor or major course. Their insights were collected through in-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussion (FGD). These individuals were selected based on their experiences with self-handicapping behaviors, aligning with the study's focus on understanding this phenomenon within the academic context. Engineering students were specifically chosen because their academic programs were known for being highly demanding and stressful, often requiring rigorous coursework, concentrated time management, and analytical skills. A sample size of 10 participants is considered adequate in qualitative research, as it allows for rich, detailed insights into personal experiences while keeping the data manageable for in-depth analysis (Creswell, 2018).

In addition, to address the study's objective, a validated interview guide questionnaire was used. It contained open-ended questions to encourage participants to reflect deeply on their personal experience, emotion, and perception. It also maintained flexibility to allow follow-up questions based on the participants' responses, ensuring that the unique nuances of their experiences were captured.

2.2 Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative descriptive approach employing thematic analysis to explore and describe the self-handicapping behaviors of students who failed in their courses. This design was appropriate for studies aiming to provide a clear, direct

summary of individual participants' personal experiences using everyday language. It focused on what participants said and how they described their experiences, without applying complex theoretical analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The Reasons Behind Student Self-Handicapping

Table 1 presents the 10 engineering students' reasons for self-handicapping, which are caused by psychological and emotional barriers, external factors, and prior personal experiences.

Table 1: The Reasons Behind Student Self-Handicapping

Themes	Core Ideas
Academic Self-Doubt and Feelings of Inadequacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Avoidance due to fear of failing the test or course• Anxiety due to academic evaluation• Fear of being perceived as incompetent
External Blaming	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Extenuating failure through personal circumstances• Accusing the teaching methods
Justification through Duties and Obligations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Avoiding academic tasks by working on non-academic responsibilities• Postponing schoolwork by citing work, chores, or health issues
Burnout	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Feeling lethargic from academic demands• Pretending to be productive while emotionally drained

3.1.1 Academic Self-Doubt and Feelings of Inadequacy

Simply having knowledge and skills is often not enough for an individual to carry out a task successfully. They must also have confidence and a strong belief in their ability to complete it. Akar *et al.* (2015) showed that individuals who believe in their capability tend to perform better than those who lack self-confidence. The likely cause of these behaviors is students' doubt about their ability to succeed in a particular situation, which leads to feelings of threat to their self-esteem (Schiwinger *et al.*, 2022). As a result, students who begin to lose confidence in their academic abilities often question whether they can meet the expectations set for them. This often leads to a fear of being seen as incompetent, especially during evaluations or high-stakes tasks. They may also choose to put off responsibilities or avoid them entirely to escape the pressure. In doing so, self-handicapping becomes a way to shield themselves from the emotional impact of possible failure.

Those engaged in high levels of self-handicapping often put in less effort, experience greater stress before exams, and perform worse compared to students who self-handicap less (Yıldırım & Demir, 2019). They also tend to have more frequent negative thoughts and lower internal motivation to succeed academically. Students who lack confidence in their academic abilities are more likely to procrastinate, which is a common form of self-handicapping, and show a tendency to avoid studying altogether. This is evident in the sample responses, where students described why the fear of being

perceived as incompetent was a reason for failing to do their academic tasks. These are illustrated in the following:

IDI_P1: *"Ah yes, I think self-handicapping protects my self-esteem because I'm scared to give my best performance. What if my answer is wrong? I'm scared people will judge me for it."*

IDI_P2: *"I've experienced that (doing his best), and it felt off because I didn't get the result I expected."*

IDI_P1 admittedly resorts to self-handicapping because of fear of being judged. For her, it feels safer to hold back than to try her best but still fail. By not fully preparing or participating, she creates a reason for any poor performance that does not demean her ability. This helps her protect her self-esteem as it allows her to say *I did not do well because I did not try* instead of facing the idea that she might not be good enough.

While IDI_P2 shared that he had high expectations after giving his best effort, the outcome did not meet those expectations, which left him feeling disappointed. This emotional gap between effort and result can lead to academic self-doubt and anxiety, especially when students begin to fear that trying hard might still fall short. As this doubt and anxiety build, they may start to question their academic ability and become more sensitive to the thought of failure. The pressure to succeed, combined with past disappointments, creates a sense of unease and hesitation when approaching future tasks. To cope, students may hold back or create excuses, using self-handicapping strategies to protect themselves from the emotional impact of another potential failure. These behaviors may temporarily ease their worries, but over time, they reinforce self-doubt and make academic growth more difficult.

3.1.2 External Blaming

External blaming happens when individuals create obstacles that interfere with achieving their goals, while accepting reasons that reduce their personal responsibility for failure and emphasizing their role in success when things go well. By attributing failure to external conditions, students may feel justified in their disengagement or lack of improvement, which ultimately hinders the development of personal responsibility and adaptive learning behaviors (Perry *et al.*, 2021). The likelihood of using self-handicapping strategies increases when students focus more on external goals or expectations set by others (Torok & Szabo, 2018). In relation to this, external blaming often appears in different forms, such as citing teacher ineffectiveness, external factors, or personal circumstances. These are illustrated in the following:

IDI_P6: *"I studied. But what really bothered me was the professor... He doesn't teach; he just leaves us on our own."*

FGD_P3: *"We found the subject difficult because it was fast-tracked. We failed during the summer class. Normally, a semester lasts three months, but it was shortened to just six weeks in summer. There were supposed to be eight exams, but was reduced to only three. In one day, we had to cover three topics."*

IDI_P3: *"The techniques I use are waking up late, which really is not a valid excuse. Another is traffic, even though I could have left earlier. I also use personal errands, like pretending I had to pay bills, even if I could have done that after class."*

IDI_P6 admitted to studying but shifted the focus away from her lapses in learning or performance and criticized the professor's teaching style instead. She removed personal responsibility and placed the blame on the teacher. This reflects a self-handicapping attitude where external factors are used as justifications to explain academic difficulties. Rather than risk feeling inadequate or incapable, the student protects their self-worth by implying that failure is not due to a lack of intelligence and ability, but due to poor instruction. Over time, relying on these kinds of external explanations can reinforce a cycle of avoidance, reduced effort, and continued academic struggle.

FGD_P3 explained that their failure was mainly due to the fast-paced nature of the summer class, emphasizing how the compressed schedule made the subject more difficult. By pointing out that the usual three-month semester was shortened to a month and a half, and that the multiple topics and exams were crammed into a limited time, the student shifts responsibility for failing away from their own preparation or study habits. Instead, they highlight structural or institutional factors—such as the academic calendar and congested coverage—as the main reasons for their poor performance. This allows them to protect their self-esteem by suggesting that the failure was due to an unfair academic setup rather than a lack of effort, ability, or intelligence.

IDI_P3 openly shared that they often use excuses like waking up late, traffic, and running personal errands to explain academic shortcomings. Although they recognize that these reasons are invalid, they still use them as scapegoats for their choices or lack of preparation that led to academic misfortunes. By using these everyday situations to explain poor performance, the student avoids taking full responsibility for the outcome. This becomes a way to protect their self-esteem by attributing failure to external factors beyond their control. These kinds of personal circumstances, while minor, are often used to justify academic setbacks. In doing so, the student reflects a self-handicapping mindset where justifying failure through personal situations replaces genuine self-reflection and accountability.

3.1.3 Justification through Duties and Obligations

In academic settings, justification or validation through duties or obligations has emerged as a subtle yet strategic form of self-handicapping wherein students attribute their academic shortcomings to socially acceptable responsibilities, part-time work, or community involvement (Uysal & Yildiz, 2019). By highlighting these external demands,

students avoid direct scrutiny of their academic competence and reduce the risk of being perceived as incapable (Zhao *et al.*, 2021). This behavior aligns with the core mechanism of self-handicapping—protecting the self from the psychological consequences of potential failure—while presenting excuses that are difficult to challenge (Ozkan & Tekkaya, 2022). Scholars have noted that such justifications are particularly prevalent among students balancing multiple life roles, where competing priorities are often accepted by society and educators (Li & Li, 2023). While these duties may be real, their use as a defense mechanism reflects a broader pattern of academic avoidance grounded in fear of negative evaluation. Therefore, such action serves not only as a rational explanation for academic underperformance but also as a self-protective strategy that reinforces disengagement and limits long-term academic growth. This pattern is evident in using responsibilities to avoid academic tasks, justifying delays with minor obligations, and citing work or health reasons to postpone schoolwork. These are illustrated below:

IDI_P4: *"I sleep or I look for ways to keep myself busy with things not related to school like doing chores at home."*

IDI_P4 used rest and household chores to avoid doing academic tasks. This strategy helps her protect her self-worth by shifting the cause of underperformance to external obligations rather than lack of ability. Such justification is often seen as acceptable and reduces the fear of negative evaluation. It also allows students to maintain a socially responsible image while avoiding tasks that may challenge their confidence. Over time, this behavior reinforces avoidance patterns and weakens academic persistence.

3.1.4 Burnout

Burnout is a critical factor that drives students to engage in self-handicapping behaviors as a means of coping with academic pressure. It arises when students experience prolonged emotional strain from continuous academic demands, leading to feelings of fatigue, detachment, and reduced accomplishment. In this state, students often find it difficult to sustain motivation or concentration, which undermines their ability to meet academic expectations. To avoid confronting the possibility of failure, they may intentionally delay tasks, lower their effort, or make excuses—typical self-handicapping strategies—to protect their self-image in the face of burnout (Li & Li, 2023). This response is not merely a lack of discipline, but a psychological defense that allows students to explain failure without attributing it to personal inadequacy. The emotional toll of burnout leads to avoidance patterns and a cycle of academic disengagement. This phenomenon presents itself in multiple ways, such as exhaustion from academic demands, burnout leading to avoidance behaviors, and pretending to be productive while emotionally drained.

IDI_P4: *"Yes, I use stress as a reason. It's like I'm really tired and just want to sleep and not do anything else."*

IDI_P1: *"I didn't feel like studying, and I had no motivation at all to study."*

IDI_P4 demonstrates she used stress and fatigue as reasons to disengage from academic responsibilities. Instead of completing tasks, the student chose to rest, using the feeling of exhaustion as a justifiable excuse for inaction. This reflects a self-handicapping strategy where emotional and physical stress is used to avoid academic demands without admitting personal limitations. By doing so, the student protects self-esteem and avoids feelings of guilt linked to underperformance. It shows how stress becomes a coping mechanism that allows students to delay schoolwork while preserving their sense of control.

IDI_P1 intentionally delayed studying due to a lack of motivation. By choosing not to engage in the task, the student avoids the possibility of failing despite trying, which can be more damaging to self-esteem. This aligns with the idea that task delay serves as a protective strategy, allowing students to preserve their self-worth by not fully exposing their abilities to evaluation. In this way, the student is shielded from the fear of failure by creating a situation where underperformance can be justified by lack of motivation rather than lack of competence.

4. Recommendations

This study revealed that students resort to self-handicapping due to academic self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy, external blaming, justification through duties and obligation, and burnout. These themes show that students intentionally create barriers as forms of emotional protection when they feel incapable, overwhelmed, or fearful of failure. Future researchers may explore how these behaviors differ across academic disciplines, year levels, or levels of academic achievement to determine if certain groups are more prone to specific self-handicapping reasons. It would also be valuable to investigate the underlying thought patterns, such as internalized fear or fixed mindsets, that influence how students rationalize their avoidance. These tools could help future studies build richer psychological profiles of self-handicapping students and support more focused research on cognitive and emotional interventions.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights that self-handicapping is not just a result of poor habits or laziness. It often stems from emotional struggles and the state of mind. Many students delay tasks, make excuses, or turn to distractions, not because they care less, but because they feel overwhelmed or afraid of being judged. While these behaviors may offer short-term relief, they can lead to long-term academic difficulties and burnout. Understanding the reasons behind self-handicapping gives us a clearer and more compassionate view of

what students are experiencing. It shows that academic failure is not always about ability, but often about mindset and well-being.

The research journey also became a reflective process for the researchers themselves, prompting them to examine their own academic habits, biases, and coping mechanisms. Through this study, they recognized the value of empathy, student-centered support, and intentional communication in academic environments. The researchers hope that the insights gained from this inquiry will contribute to ongoing efforts toward cultivating a more compassionate, self-aware, and responsive educational landscape where students are not only expected to perform but are meaningfully supported to thrive.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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