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Academic Stress Among First-Year Guidance and Counseling Students: A Descriptive Survey of Its Key Manifestations

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Abstract

Academic stress is a critical issue among first-year undergraduate students, as the transition to higher education demands adjustment to new learning patterns, academic workloads, and performance standards. This study aims to describe the level of academic stress among first-year Guidance and Counseling students and its distribution based on indicators of academic stress manifestations. A quantitative approach with a descriptive survey design was employed. The study population comprised 198 students, with 115 respondents selected through simple random sampling. Data were collected cross-sectionally using an instrument covering five indicators: pressure from study, workload, worry about grade, self-expectation, and despondency, and were subsequently analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings revealed that 55.5% of respondents experienced moderate academic stress, 29.5% experienced high stress, and 14.8% fell into the low category. Overall, 85% of respondents experienced moderate-to-high levels of academic stress. When analyzed by individual indicators, the highest proportion of students experiencing high academic stress was found in worry about grade (33.9%), followed by self-expectation (31.3%) and workload (29.6%). These findings underscore the need for early assessment and the development of sustainable Guidance and Counseling services to strengthen first-year students' adaptability and academic stress management skills.

Keywords: academic stress; first-year students; guidance and counseling

1. Introduction

Academic stress is one of the psychological problems experienced by many students when academic demands are perceived to exceed their ability to overcome them. This condition can be characterized by pressure, fear of failure, and difficulty meeting study demands optimally (Fernandes et al., 2023). This problem is increasingly important for first-year students because they are in the transition phase from secondary education to higher education which requires adjustments to different learning systems, academic loads, social environments, and learning independence. In the measurement of the prevalence of academic stress in new students of the Faculty of Psychology UIN Malang, it was found that 90% were in the high category (Mumtaza et al., 2025). This high prevalence shows that academic stress is a problem that needs attention from the beginning of the lecture period.

First-year students' vulnerability to academic stress is influenced by the demands of adaptation that take place simultaneously (Wulandari & Khoirunnisa, 2026). Changes in learning methods, assignment and evaluation demands, time management, social environment, and the need to study more independently can be sources of pressure, which are reinforced by personal factors such as low confidence in one's abilities, economic conditions, traveling, incompatibility of study choices, and worries about the future (Julika & Setiyawati, 2019;

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Rabuka et al., 2023; Rianti et al., 2024). These pressures can manifest in various forms, such as difficulty concentrating and remembering information, anxiety, frustration, negative self-assessment, and adjustment disorders that can ultimately hinder students' academic processes and achievements (Puspita & Kumalasari, 2022).

Empirical findings show that this issue is also relevant in the context of Guidance and Counseling students. Research on first-year students shows that academic demands are one of the dominant sources of perceived chronic stress, while research in Indonesia found that the proportion of first-year students who are in the category of moderate to high academic stress is quite large (Mumtaza et al., 2025; Onuoha et al., 2025). In first-year BK students, academic stress was also found to be a problem that needs attention, and other studies have shown a link between self-efficacy and academic stress (Siregar & Putri, 2020). On the other hand, previous research has largely focused on testing the effectiveness of interventions to reduce academic stress, such as mindfulness, religious coping, self-efficacy training, and expressive writing (Cholili et al., 2024; Fadilla & Srianturi, 2025; Rahmadini et al., 2026). This tendency suggests that research attention is more directed to how to reduce stress than to comprehensively map students' academic stress conditions.

This gap shows the need for empirical data that specifically describe the level of academic stress of first-year BK students, including their manifestation patterns. This kind of mapping is important because students' psychological conditions can differ according to the characteristics of the study program, academic environment, and learning demands faced (Agestin et al., 2026). For BK students, early identification becomes increasingly strategic because they are not only required to achieve academic competence, but also develop personal maturity, social skills, self-regulation, empathy, and professional readiness as prospective counselors (Insani & Astuti, 2024; Naser et al., 2025). Unidentified academic stress has the potential to hinder the process and have an impact on academic engagement and student psychological well-being.

Therefore, this study aims to describe the level of academic stress of first-year students of Guidance and Counseling based on the distribution of score categories and indicators of academic stress manifestations. The results of the study are expected to provide baseline data on the academic stress conditions of students at the beginning of the lecture period which can be the basis for identifying student needs and designing guidance and counseling services that are more targeted. Thus, academic stress mapping not only functions as an overview of students' psychological conditions, but also as an evidence-based foundation for prevention and mentoring efforts that support academic success, university adaptation, and competency development of prospective counselors.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study uses a quantitative approach with a descriptive survey design. The design was chosen because the study aims to describe the level of academic stress of first-year students of the Guidance and Counseling Study Program, including the distribution of stress levels and their manifestation characteristics, without examining the cause-and-effect relationship between variables. Data collection was carried out in a cross-sectional manner, namely data

was collected in a period of time to obtain an overview of the academic stress conditions of students at the time the research was carried out (Alhadad & Hermina, 2025; Morrisan, 2012).

2.2. Participants

The research population is all first-year students of the Guidance and Counseling Study Program which totals 198 students. The sample was selected using a simple random sampling technique, so that each member of the population has the same opportunity to be selected as a respondent. Based on this technique, 115 students were obtained as a research sample.

2.3. Instrument

Data collection was conducted using the Academic Stress Questionnaire (ASQ) adopted from Zamroni et al. (2019). This instrument was used to measure academic stress through five manifestation indicators that refer to the concept of academic stress by Sun et al. (2011) and the stress framework of Lazarus and Folkman (1984). The five indicators include pressure from study, workload, worry about grade, self-expectation, and despondency.

Table 1. Academic Stress Questionnaire (ASQ)

Variable		Items	
Latent	**Manifest**	**Frequency**	**Number**
Academic Stress	*Pressure from Study*	5	1, 6, 15, 19, 21
	Workload	5	2, 7, 14, 17, 22
	Worry about Grade	5	3, 8, 13, 16, 23
	Self-Expectation	5	4, 9, 12, 18, 24
	Despondency	5	5, 10, 11, 20, 25
Total		**25**	

Based on the results of the instrument test, the validity value of the item was in the range of 0.231–0.612, greater than the critical value of 0.183. The reliability of the instrument was based on the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.730, which had met the reliability criterion ≥ 0.70. Thus, the instrument was declared to meet the validity and reliability criteria for use in the study.

2.4. Research Procedur

The research procedure follows the survey stages which include: (1) identifying research problems, (2) determining research objectives, (3) determining survey design, (4) determining population and sampling techniques, (5) determining the number of samples, (6) determining research instruments, (7) collecting data, (8) processing data, (9) analyzing data, and (10) presenting research results and discussions (Maidiana, 2021).

2.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics 29 for Windows. Because the study used a descriptive survey design, the analysis was focused on descriptive statistics to describe the level of academic stress of students and their distribution based on score categories and indicators of academic stress manifestations. The results of the analysis were then presented in the form of frequency, percentage, and score distribution so that an empirical picture was obtained about the academic stress conditions of first-year students of the Guidance and Counseling Study Program.

3. Results and Discussion

This research was carried out on first-year students of Guidance and Counseling in the first year, where the age interval ranged from 17-20 years. Data was collected through the Academic Stress Questionnaire (ASQ) which was disseminated through the Google Form platform. The number of respondents was 115 students, with the characteristics of the respondents presented in Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2. Distribution of Respondent Characteristics by Age

Variable	Mean	Min	Max
Age	19.1	17	20

Based on Table 2, as many as 115 first-year Guidance and Counseling students who became respondents had an average age of 19.1 years old, with an age range of 17–20 years old. The data showed that the respondents were in a relatively close age range and represented a group of students in the early phase of higher education.

Table 3. Distribution of Respondent Characteristics by Gender

Gender	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Male	18	16
Female	97	84

Based on Table 3, the majority of respondents were female, namely 97 students (84%), while male respondents amounted to 18 students (16%). The composition shows that the research sample is dominated by female students. Then the results of collecting data on the level of academic stress of first-year students of Guidance and Counseling are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Prevalence of Academic Stress in First-Year Students of Guidance and Counseling

Academic Stress Levels	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Low	17	15
Moderate	64	55.5
High	34	29.5
Total	**115**	**100**

Table 4 shows that the academic stress level of first-year students is most in the medium category, namely 64 students (55.5%). Furthermore, 34 students (29.5%) are in the high category and 17 students (15%) are in the low category. Thus, as many as 85% of respondents are in the medium and high categories, while less than a fifth of respondents are in the low category.

Table 5. Frequency Distribution of Academic Stress Levels by Manifestation Indicators

Indicator	Low		Moderate		High	
	f	%	f	%	f	%

Despondency	17	14.8	65	56.5	33	28.7
Pressure from Study	13	11.3	73	63.5	29	25.2
Workload	18	15.7	63	54.8	34	29.6
Worry about Grade	15	13.0	61	53.0	39	33.9
Self-Expectation	19	16.5	60	52.2	36	31.3

The results of the study show that academic stress is a common phenomenon that occurs in first-year students of the Guidance and Counseling Study Program. As many as 55.5% of students are in the category of moderate academic stress and 29.5% are in the high category. Thus, 85% of respondents are in the medium to high range, which shows that the experience of entering higher education is still an important context in the emergence of academic stress. These findings are in line with a study of first-year students who place the transition period to college as a period marked by changes in academic demands, demands for independence, adjustment to a new environment, and the formation of social networks. Maymon & Hall (2021) explained that stress in first-year students is related to the demands of transition and the adaptation process that takes place simultaneously. Research by McLean et al. (2023) also shows that first-year students face stress in the context of adjusting to the academic and social environment of the university, while social support is one of the relevant resources in dealing with the transition process.

A more important finding in this study lies in the pattern of academic stress manifestations. The five indicators analyzed, namely pressure from study, workload, worry about grade, self-expectation, and despondency, were both dominated by the medium category, but had different proportions of high categories. Based on the proportion of the high category, worry about grade showed the highest percentage (33.9%), followed by self-expectation (31.3%), workload (29.6%), despondency (28.7%), and pressure from study (25.2%). This pattern shows that academic stress in first-year students is not only reflected in the number of academic demands that must be solved, but also in the way students evaluate their academic success and set standards for themselves. Thus, the most prominent manifestations in this study are precisely in the evaluative and internal dimensions, namely concern about academic results and expectations of self-achievement.

The prominence of worry about grade indicates that evaluation of learning outcomes is an important part of the academic stress experience of first-year students. Grades not only function as an administrative outcome of the learning process, but can also be a source of evaluation of students' self-abilities, success, and academic position. These findings are in line with Zheng et al. (2023) who show a relationship between academic stress and anxiety in facing academic evaluations, with the role of emotional self-efficacy and expectations in explaining the experience. In the context of first-year students in Indonesia, Putra & Ardi (2024) also found that psychological factors such as academic self-efficacy, life satisfaction, and happiness are related to academic stress. These results reinforce the interpretation that the experience of academic stress does not solely depend on the magnitude of the academic demands that students receive, but also on how students view their academic competencies and achievements.

The finding of self-expectation as the second manifestation with the highest frequency of the high category further strengthens the importance of internal factors in the academic stress experience of first-year students. Expectations of oneself can be related to achievement

standards, the desire to maintain achievement, and personal demands to meet certain descriptions of successful students (Ardi et al., 2022). In the context of the transition to higher education, these standards can become increasingly important as students begin to take greater responsibility for managing their own learning process (Rachmaningtyas & Khoirunnisa, 2022). However, the findings of this study cannot be interpreted as a cause of stress, because the research design is descriptive and does not test causal relationships. A more appropriate interpretation is that expectations of self-achievement are one of the strongest manifestations in the academic stress experiences of first-year students. The findings of Ardi et al. (2022) provide relevant context because they show that self-expectation, grade worry, workload, and despondency are positively related to study pressure. Although the study was conducted in the context of learning during the pandemic and used structural analysis, similarity in the constructs suggests that the internal and external dimensions are interrelated parts of students' experiences of academic stress.

On the other hand, workload ranks third with 29.6% of students in the high category and 54.8% in the medium category. These findings show that workload, academic work completion demands, deadlines, and the need to manage time remain important manifestations, but not the manifestations with the largest proportion of the high category. This pattern is interesting because it shows that academic stress for first-year students cannot be reduced to the problem of "too many tasks". Ardi et al. (2022) found that workload is one of the components related to study pressure, even playing a role in the relationship between self-expectation and learning pressure. In line with that, systematic studies of academic stress place academic burden, time limitations, adaptation demands, and changes in the learning environment as recurring sources of stress in students. Thus, the results of this study support the view that workload is an important component, but the experience of academic stress becomes more complex because these demands interact with students' assessment of their own success and ability.

Meanwhile, despondency showed that 56.5% of students were in the medium category and 28.7% in the high category. This position shows that academic stress does not stop at the perception of demands or worries about grades, but can also be manifested in psychological experiences in the form of feelings of overload and difficulty coping with academic demands (Mubarok et al., 2025). The category of despondency in this study cannot be used to conclude the existence of a psychological disorder or certain clinical conditions, but is understood as a form of stress manifestation reported by respondents. This interpretation is in line with Barbayannis et al. (2022), who found a negative relationship between academic stress and mental well-being in students. The higher the experience of academic stress, the lower the mental well-being reported. Therefore, the existence of a group of students with a high category of despondency should be seen as an important signal for further assessment and support, not as a basis for providing a diagnosis.

In contrast to other indicators, pressure from study has the lowest proportion of the high category, which is 25.2%, although the medium category still dominates at 63.5%. This finding does not mean that the pressure from study is not important. In fact, the low proportion of the high category compared to worry about grade and self-expectation indicates that the pressure felt by students does not solely come from external demands directly provided by the academic environment (Nabila & Selian, 2026). Students can experience considerable pressure even though the perception of direct learning pressure is at a relatively lower level, because the

pressure is also related to concerns about the results and personal standards that students build (Rahmalia & Hamidi, 2026). In the context of the university transition, this can be understood through an adjustment process that not only involves changing the learning system, but also changing the way students see themselves as more independent learners. McLean et al. (2023) point out the importance of social support sources in helping first-year students cope with transition stressors, so that the experience of stress should be viewed as a result of the interaction between academic demands and the adaptive resources available to students.

Overall, the pattern of the five indicators gives an idea that first-year students' academic stress has a multidimensional character. External manifestations in the form of workload and pressure from study are present along with more internal manifestations in the form of worry about grade and self-expectation, then can be accompanied by psychological manifestations in the form of despondency. Therefore, the findings of this study are more appropriately understood as a spectrum of stress experiences than as a single response. Students face academic demands, assess these demands in relation to their own standards and abilities, worry about academic consequences, and in some students experience heavier psychological responses (Mufatihah et al., 2025; Nabila & Selian, 2026). The findings are an interpretive framework for understanding the pattern of findings, not the causal model proven by this study. This is important because the design of the descriptive survey only allows the study to describe the distribution of stress levels and their manifestations without determining the direction of the relationship or the cause-and-effect mechanism.

The findings of this study indicate that academic stress is a multidimensional phenomenon that dominates the lives of first-year students, where the largest proportion are in the medium (55.5%) and high (29.5%) categories. The high percentage of students who experience stress in the high category requires comprehensive attention and special interventions. This condition confirms that the transition phase from secondary education to higher education requires a massive psychological and academic adaptation process. In line with Masduki (2025) findings, the high escalation of academic stress is directly proportional to the decline in students' mental well-being, which if ignored can have a negative impact on long-term academic studies and performance. Therefore, higher education institutions need to respond to these findings through strengthening peer counseling services and proactively optimizing academic support systems.

The results of this study confirm the importance of attention, program development, and sustainable interventions to increase students' mental empowerment and resilience. Based on a number of previous experimental studies, there are several intervention program recommendations that have been proven effective in reducing academic stress, including; 1) Self-Regulated Learning skills training has been proven to help students effectively manage their study load, set realistic targets, and reduce anxiety about grades through improved self-control and adaptive learning strategies (Ghani & Surawan, 2025); 2) Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction psychological intervention programs are consistently effective in reducing psychological stress levels, overcoming indicators of despondency, and improving the emotional well-being of new students during the college transition period (Zuo et al., 2023); 3) The cognitive behavioral approach (Cognitive Behavioral Group Counseling) is designed to reconstruct excessive self-expectations and concerns about academic evaluation, so that students are able to develop cognitive appraisals that are more adaptive to the demands of the study (Hollon et al., 2002).

Although it provides an important empirical picture regarding the prevalence of academic stress among first-year students of guidance and counseling, this study has methodological limitations that need to be acknowledged, namely the use of quantitative descriptive survey research designs that only map and describe stress levels without examining causal relationships or examining psychological and environmental factors in depth. This survey design does not allow researchers to draw definitive cause-and-effect conclusions regarding the main triggers of academic stress. Therefore, the recommendation for the next research agenda is to adopt an advanced, experimental, or mixed methods correlation design to explore psychological dynamics in a more comprehensive and in-depth manner.

4. Conclusion

This study provides an overview that academic stress in first-year students of Guidance and Counseling is a multidimensional phenomenon. Academic stress is not only related to academic demands, but also includes how students perceive achievements, meet their own standards, and face the process of adaptation in the university environment. This study presents a specific mapping of academic stress manifestations in first-year students of Guidance and Counseling, as a population that is building academic competence as well as professional abilities as prospective BK teachers and counselors. The findings provide a conceptual basis for Guidance and Counseling to place academic stress assessments as part of efforts to develop student empowerment. The results of this mapping can be directed to the development of preventive, sustainable, and needs-based preventive services and interventions to strengthen students' ability to manage academic demands and undergo the transition to higher education optimally.

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