

Deciphering Excellence: An Appreciative Inquiry on the Academic Journey of Criminologist Licensure Examination Topnotchers

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ABSTRACT

Pursuing excellence in criminology is epitomized by those who achieve top ranks in the Criminologist Licensure Examination, reflecting academic rigor and personal dedication. This Study explored the factors contributing to the success of top-performing individuals in the exam using a qualitative approach through Appreciative Inquiry. Eleven participants, selected through purposive and snowball sampling, provided insights into their academic journeys via a researcher-made interview guide. Conducted across various regions of the Philippines, participants were chosen based on their being registered criminologists and topnotchers in the past ten years and their willingness to contribute insights. Analysis revealed key themes: In Discovery, thriving through financial resilience, excelling through academic adaptability. In Dreams, motivation for personal growth, desire for recognition and opportunities, reason behind their success. In Design, comprehensive learning techniques, strategic time management, self-discipline. In Destiny, effective teaching strategies, personal preparation and mindset, career opportunities and professional recognition. The Study concludes that financial and familial support, internal drive, and effective learning strategies are crucial for academic success. Recommendations include fostering support systems, recognizing diverse motivations, and promoting holistic learning approaches. Future research should explore success factors in different regions and the long-term impacts of topnotcher status.

Keywords: Academic Success; Criminologist Licensure Examination; Excellence; Study Habits; Criminology; Appreciative Inquiry; Topnotchers; Diverse Motivations; Learning Strategies; Support Systems.

1. Introduction

The Professional Regulation Commission (PRC) administers the Criminologist Licensure Examination (CLE), which serves as a gateway to the workforce for graduates and a crucial indicator of the caliber of criminology education in the Philippines (Barreda & Barreda, 2023). A student's academic career comes to an end when they pass this difficult test, which also opens up a wide range of career options, including leadership positions and government service (Albina et al., 2022; Riva, 2019).

Success in the CLE is a source of pride and a testament to the students' and higher education institutions' (HEIs') commitment (Albite, 2019). In order to improve performance on licensing exams, HEIs are constantly improving their teaching and learning strategies (Noderama, 2020).

Although there is a substantial amount of research on the factors that affect licensure exam success in a variety of professions, such as teaching and nursing (Pregoner, 2020; Bayawa et al., 2022), there is a clear lack of information regarding the particular experiences and tactics of high-achieving criminology students. Current research frequently ignores the complex paths taken by top scorers on the Criminologist Licensure Examination in favor of concentrating on overall academic achievement or the difficulties encountered by those who fail.

Therefore, by offering a targeted examination of the distinct pathways, incentives, and support networks that contribute to their outstanding rankings, this study seeks to close this gap. Developing focused interventions and support networks for upcoming generations of criminology students requires an understanding of these particular factors (Albina et al., 2022).

The academic journey of these topnotchers is examined in this study using an appreciative inquiry approach, emphasizing their accomplishments, strengths, and happy memories rather than their setbacks or difficulties. By delving into the effective learning methodologies, study techniques, and support networks they utilized, this study seeks to create a rich and detailed picture of what excellence truly looks like in this field. The results are meant to be more than a list of accomplishments; they will offer practical advice that can be applied to improve and enhance current teaching methods.

The ultimate objective of this research is to offer a useful tool for academic institutions, instructors, and prospective criminology students. The research can direct the creation of more effective curricula, review programs, and support systems by highlighting the successful tactics and mindsets of individuals who have achieved the highest level of academic success. This will foster a culture of academic excellence and ongoing improvement for the entire profession, in addition to helping future students get better prepared for the CLE and adding to the body of knowledge in criminal justice education (Amanonce & Maramag, 2020; Barreda & Barreda, 2023).

1.1. Study Objectives

This study explores the academic journeys of topnotchers in the Criminologist Licensure Examination (CLE) to understand the factors contributing to their success. Specifically, this research aims to answer the following questions: (1) What were the key experiences and challenges encountered by CLE topnotchers throughout their academic journey? (2) What were the primary motivations and aspirations that drove them to excel? (3) What effective learning methodologies, study techniques, and support systems did they utilize in their preparation? (4) How can the insights from their experiences be used to improve academic practices and preparation strategies for future criminology students and educators?

2. Methods

The academic journeys of Criminologist Licensure Examination (CLE) topnotchers were investigated in this study using a qualitative research design and the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach. Because AI focuses on identifying strengths, aspirations, and constructive behaviors that lead to success, it was judged appropriate. The study was carried out in several Philippine regions that are home to topnotchers. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to choose participants, who had to meet three requirements: (1) be registered criminologists; (2) be acknowledged as topnotchers in the CLE in the previous ten years; and (3) be open to sharing their experiences. Semi-structured interviews using validated researcher-made questions were used to collect data. Participants were able to describe their experiences, coping mechanisms, and support networks through open-ended questions. Online platforms were used to conduct the interviews, which were then verbatim transcribed for analysis after being recorded with consent.

The 4D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry (Discovery, Dream, Design, Destiny) was used to conduct an inductive analysis of the data. Coding and theme development followed this framework, highlighting participants' strengths, aspirations, strategies, and sustainability practices. Strict adherence to ethical principles was maintained. The

university ethics committee gave its approval, and each participant gave their informed consent. Voluntary participation, the right to withdraw, and confidentiality of responses were ensured throughout the study.

3. Results and Discussion

From the participants' responses, four major themes were developed following the Appreciative Inquiry 4D Model. **Discovery** reflects thriving through financial resilience and excelling through academic adaptability. **Dream** captures motivation for personal growth, desire for recognition and opportunities, and the reason behind their success. **Design** emphasizes comprehensive learning techniques, strategic time management, and self-discipline. Lastly, **Destiny** highlights effective teaching strategies, personal preparation and mindset, and career opportunities and professional recognition. These themes highlight the comprehensive character of top scorers on the Criminologist Licensure Examination's academic paths. Their stories show not only the methods they used to study for the test but also the goals and principles that kept them going. The study emphasizes how strengths, visions, strategies, and consistent practices come together to create excellence by contextualizing their experiences within the Appreciative Inquiry 4D Cycle.

3.1. Discovery

3.1.1. Thriving Through Financial Resilience

The theme thriving through financial resilience emphasizes the crucial role of economic stability in the academic journey of Criminologist Licensure Examination topnotchers. Financial resilience enables these scholars to focus on their rigorous studies without the distraction of economic hardships, enhancing their ability to achieve top scores. By managing financial challenges effectively, these topnotchers demonstrate that overcoming economic adversity is integral to their overall success and professional excellence.

Moreover, Participant 1 highlights the transformative power of educational opportunities, particularly through scholarships provided by review centers, underscoring the pivotal role such support systems play in alleviating financial burdens and enabling academic pursuits. Another Participant 2 candidly shares the hardships of being from a modest background, where even necessities like exam fees become insurmountable hurdles. Their determination shines through as they recount taking up manual labor to finance their education, showcasing an unwavering commitment to their academic aspirations. These are indicated in the following interview responses:

"I have a financial problem, but since the review center offered me a scholarship, that is why I have overcome it. On the other hand, my family is very supportive of my review." (P1)

"I have encountered the big one, the financial challenge, because I came from a family that is not rich, and it came to a point that I could not attend exams due to financial problems. I experienced an expenditure problem, leading me to become a laborer to finance my studies." (P2)

Amidst the challenges posed by the pandemic, Participant 4 grapples with the practicalities of accessing study materials, emphasizing the strain imposed by financial constraints on even seemingly trivial expenses like printing. Despite the strain on their eyes from prolonged screen time, their perseverance underscores a steadfast dedication

to their educational journey. The supportive role of family emerges as a recurring motif, with Participants 5, 6, 8, 9, and 11 acknowledging the invaluable backing received from siblings and parents. Whether through financial assistance or emotional encouragement, familial support is vital during financial uncertainty. These are indicated in the following interview responses:

"Regarding financial challenges, it is difficult for me to print materials, especially during a pandemic. I am having a hard time finding where to print. I used soft copy, but in the long run, your eyes will be damaged, and I can prove it because there was a time my eye would produce tears, but I still pursue it." (P4)

"Financial challenges are what I face, especially in times of enrollment or even in a review center. Sometimes, I cannot go to review because I have no money, or I will review without money, which are the challenges I have met." (P5)

"When it comes to financial challenges, I can say that I am surviving because my siblings have supported me since I was the youngest, so there were already privileges. It does not mean much, but I can say it is enough." (P6)

"The other thing that challenges me is the financial support, and we all know that reviewing it is expensive, just like allowances for food, fare, and everything, as well as the payment for the review center." (P8)

"I have encountered financial and monetary challenges, way back in my previous studies. I am lucky that I have parents who help me financially." (P9)

"I never considered going to college due to my parents' financial constraints. I took a year off to support my older brother and waited until graduation. That year, I witnessed firsthand the struggle to earn even a single centavo to cover our daily expenses." (P11)

A common thread of resilience and resourcefulness emerges in the narratives shared by participants facing financial challenges. One participant highlights the impact of educational opportunities, specifically scholarships, in alleviating financial burdens. Facing numerous challenges that might hurt their career choices, learning experiences, and academic performance. The strain of financial constraints is further emphasized during the pandemic when accessing study materials becomes challenging. Despite these obstacles, participants exhibit perseverance and dedication to their educational journey.

Family support emerges as a significant motif, providing both financial assistance and emotional encouragement. This familial backing is a vital lifeline during financial uncertainty, enabling participants to navigate their challenges more resiliently. The participants' financial challenges extend to difficulties in affording necessities like exam fees. Such obstacles highlight the need for external support systems to bridge the gap and facilitate academic progression. Another participant's story depicted the hardships faced due to modest backgrounds, where even basic expenses like exam fees posed significant obstacles, yet their determination led them to take up manual labor to finance their education, showcasing unwavering commitment.

The implications of these highlight the critical need for enhanced support systems, such as scholarships and financial aid programs, to ensure equitable access to education. By addressing financial barriers, educational

institutions, and policymakers can foster a more inclusive academic environment, enabling students from diverse economic backgrounds to excel. Furthermore, the resilience demonstrated by these participants underscores the importance of developing comprehensive support structures that encompass both financial assistance and emotional encouragement to help students thrive academically despite economic adversity.

3.1.2. Excelling Through Academic Adaptability

The theme shared by the participants, a common thread of adaptation and growth emerges. Each narrative reflects a proactive approach to academic navigation, from leveraging technology to overcome comprehension hurdles to seeking guidance on prioritizing review subjects. Participant 3 used technology to understand complex terms, while Participant 4 sought and applied advice from review centers to effectively prioritize their study subjects. These are indicated in the following interview responses:

"I encountered information that I cannot understand. I just googled it. When I was studying, phones were prohibited in our school, so when there were terms that I could not understand, I just looked at the glossary of the book, and if I could not find it in the books, I would google it after class." (P3)

"I had difficulty deciding what subject I needed to review first. In the review center, I gained some tips, and they also helped me with what to do first and reviewing the hardest ones down to the easy ones." (P4)

There is a palpable sense of determination in managing time effectively to avoid failure and a willingness to step out of comfort zones in pursuit of excellence. For instance, Participant 5 managed their time meticulously to prevent failure due to the pressure of maintaining high academic standards. Despite initial reservations or cultural shocks, participants like Participant 6 and Participant 10 embraced the journey resiliently, buoyed by familial and instructional support. Participant 6 stepped out of their comfort zone to strive for academic excellence, while Participant 7 continued studying despite the pressures from family and instructors. Meanwhile, Participant 8 navigated the challenge of accessing study materials using online resources, demonstrating adaptability. These are indicated in the following interview responses:

"I am afraid to fail since I am a cum laude. I am also anxious about what people will say. So, somehow, I manage my time in order for me not to fail. I manage my time more than ever since I did not have any issues like I do not go somewhere else and am just at home." (P5)

"When I was still a student, I was the silent one. Though I already had intelligence, I never excelled and shone because I was so silent. Way back, it was a challenge for me in my academic journey. I came out of my comfort zone when preparing for the board exam. I strive hard and do everything." (P6)

"I need to spend time in reading despite its difficulty, but we need to continue because of the pressure that we get from our family and instructors." (P7)

"The challenge I have encountered is access to the materials because at our place before, the materials were not that available, just like watching free videos on YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok, and there were already downloadable materials." (P8)

"When it comes to academic journey, there is culture shock because from first year to fourth-year high school the terminologies are different and you have no idea." (P10)

The narratives shared by the participants in adapting to academic transitions and challenges highlight a proactive approach to overcoming obstacles and embracing growth. Participants demonstrated resilience by utilizing various strategies such as leveraging technology for comprehension, seeking guidance on prioritizing review subjects, managing time effectively to avoid failure (Kokotsaki, 2023), stepping out of comfort zones for academic excellence, and persisting in reading despite difficulties. These actions reflect a deep commitment to academic success and a willingness to navigate challenges with determination.

Academic resilience and coping strategies are important in the participants' accounts. Resilience is crucial in facing academic challenges and achieving positive outcomes (Zainoodin et al., 2021). Adopting a sense of gratitude and appreciation can help students overcome obstacles in their educational journey (Lobo, 2022). Additionally, interventions focusing on resilience can benefit higher education students in navigating the complexities of academic life (Ang et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the narratives underscore the significance of support systems in academic journeys. Familial and instructional support were highlighted as sources of motivation for participants. The role of mentors in building resilience and overcoming failures was emphasized (Hall & Ketcham, 2022). Additionally, the Study on undocumented students navigating disclosure processes sheds light on the challenges marginalized groups face in academia (Raza et al., 2019).

The implications of these narratives highlight the necessity of fostering environments that promote academic adaptability and resilience. By providing access to technology, effective time management strategies, and robust support systems, educational institutions can better equip students to navigate academic challenges and excel. Additionally, the emphasis on stepping out of comfort zones and leveraging diverse resources underscores the importance of creating inclusive and flexible learning environments that cater to varied student needs and backgrounds, ultimately enhancing overall academic success.

3.2. Dream

3.2.1. Motivation for Personal Growth

The theme underscores the internal drive that propels the participants' dreams of excelling. This motivation fuels their commitment to continuous learning and self-improvement, pushing them to master complex criminological concepts and skills. Participant 1 exhibits a silent determination to become a topnotcher, underscoring a commitment to academic excellence that transcends personal recognition. Similarly, Participant 2 drive is fueled by familial financial struggles, showcasing a desire to prove one is worth despite adversity. These are indicated in the following interview responses:

"Yes, I aspire to be a topnotcher silently. I did not vulgar it, but it is the aim that I keep in mind. Every time I go to classes, I learn something and must excel in our profession. I want to be a topnotcher, but I did not say it to anybody because of shame." (P1)

"Regarding motivation, I want to excel and strive harder to study because of my situation and my parents, who lack financial skills. The financial status pushed me to do better and strive harder." (P2)

The dream of topping board exams symbolizes individual success and is a beacon of hope and inspiration for others. Participant 3 motivation is deeply personal, as they aim to vindicate their family's honor and demonstrate that perseverance can triumph over past hardships. For Participant 8, the goal of becoming a topnotcher is a form of redemption and a means to compensate for earlier academic shortcomings. Participant 10 aspires to use their achievements and knowledge to uplift and empower future generations of aspiring criminologists, reflecting a collective aspiration to pay it forward.

Moreover, there is a collective aspiration to pay it forward, to utilize one's achievements and knowledge to uplift and empower others. Participants like Participant 10 envision their success as a means to mentor and support future generations, embodying a vision of mentorship and support for aspiring criminologists. Through these dreams, we witness the transformative power of ambition, resilience, and altruism, serving as guiding lights illuminating the path toward personal growth and collective success. These are indicated in the following interview responses:

"I was in my fourth year, and my father was convicted; my purpose suddenly disappeared because I had bad feelings about the police officer, but when my father went out of jail, I thought that there was still justice. So, it became my motivation to top in the board exam to prove to them that despite what happened to my father, his son can still be a criminologist and compete." (P3)

"I aim to become a topnotcher and tell myself that in this board exam, I will do my best and cover up my failure in the minor subjects. In my mind, I am compensating for it that though I failed in the minor subject, I recovered through this board exam to be a topnotcher, and it really stands as my motivation that they can see someone achieve something and you are just an ordinary student, but maybe you will top in board exam." (P8)

"I dream to be one of them someday, to become one of the topnotchers. I want to use what I have learned in order help those aspiring criminologists and topnotchers; those are the things that motivate me, that's why I put all my best during our review because I want to be like our teachers in college and know the feeling when you can be able to help your student or your reviewers to achieve their dreams." (P10)

Motivation for personal growth among board exam takers is crucial to their preparation and performance. The aspiration to become a topnotcher symbolizes a silent determination to overcome challenges, whether from familial financial struggles or a desire to prove one's worth in the face of adversity (Abdelrahman, 2020).

Studies have shown that success in exams is not solely dependent on coping with stress but is influenced by the conscious self-regulation system, emphasizing the importance of self-regulation in achieving educational goals (Morosanova et al., 2019). Additionally, implementing effective strategies, such as coaching and formative assessments, can enhance board exam performance and professional self-regulation (Pregoner, 2020). Changes in assessment systems have been found to reduce student exam failure rates, improve board exam performance, and enhance overall learning outcomes. The impact of personal factors on exam performance, such as personality interventions, highlights the need to address individual characteristics in exam preparation (Jamora et al., 2016).

The implications of personal motivation for board exam success extend beyond academic achievement, resonating deeply with the human experience of perseverance, resilience, and aspiration.

For individuals preparing for the criminologist licensure examination, personal motivations often stem from profound experiences and challenges, such as familial hardships or a desire for redemption. These motivations not only drive intense study efforts but also shape personal growth and character development. They inspire individuals to overcome obstacles, validate their abilities, and contribute meaningfully to their communities. Moreover, the journey towards achieving top ranks in board exams fosters a sense of purpose and fulfillment, highlighting the transformative power of determination and the potential for individuals to positively impact others through their achievements. This human dimension underscores how personal motivations are pivotal in shaping both academic success and holistic personal development, reinforcing the significance of resilience and aspiration in educational pursuits.

3.2.2. Desire for Recognition and Opportunities

Recognition and opportunities highlight the driving force behind individuals striving for excellence not only for personal satisfaction but to gain recognition that can open doors to advanced career opportunities and professional networks. The goal of topping the board exam promises immediate organizational affiliations and direct employment, along with the allure of monetary rewards and prestigious honors from their educational institutions.

A pragmatic yet hopeful outlook is evident in pursuing financial stability and the aspiration to secure top honors, tempered by moments of self-doubt. Participant 5, for instance, articulates a dual focus on avoiding failure and achieving financial stability, driven by significant monetary incentives offered by the school for top performers. Despite these challenges, there is an underlying yearning for visibility and acknowledgment within the industry, driven by a desire to discover a distinct identity and capitalize on early career opportunities. Participant 6 aspiration to be a topnotcher underscores the belief that such success would bring significant professional opportunities and personal recognition. These are indicated in the following interview responses:

“My first goal is not to fail and graduate with flying colors; my second is to be financially stable. The school rewards 500 thousand pesos to the top 1, so my goal is to get the 500 thousand. Then, my vision is that a little part of me wants to be a top-notcher, but I doubt myself; I want to pass the board exam and be financially stable.” (P5)

“My goal then was to be a topnotcher because there is much opportunity when you are a topnotcher in the board exam. I also wanted people to know me and to top it up, it is the opportunity that I have envisioned.” (P6)

Through these dreams, we witness a convergence of personal ambition and external validation, with each participant envisioning a future where success not only brings financial rewards but also opens doors to recognition and prominence within their chosen field. Participant 4 envisions that excelling in the board exam would lead to instant employment opportunities and recognition, highlighting the practical benefits of such achievements. Participant 9's motivation for distinction in the industry as early as possible reflects a deep-seated desire for early career success and professional acknowledgment. These are indicated in the following interview responses:

“If I top the board exam, I can immediately be in an organization or be hired directly; that was my thought before. Also, the money from the school and the honor and recognition if you top the board of criminology.” (P4)

“My number one motivation is the reward money, and aside from that, I wanted to have a distinct name from the industry as early as possible, so that is why I am aiming to stand out before I graduate.” (P9)

In the realm of aspirations and desires for recognition and opportunities among board exam takers, the dreams of topping the board exam are intertwined with the promise of immediate organizational affiliations, direct employment, monetary rewards, and prestigious honors from the school. Participants exhibit a pragmatic yet hopeful outlook, aiming for financial stability and the top prize while navigating moments of self-doubt. These aspirations are underpinned by a yearning for visibility and acknowledgment within the industry, driven by a desire to establish a distinct identity and capitalize on early career opportunities (Herrmann et al., 2022). The convergence of personal ambition and external validation in these dreams signifies a future where success brings financial rewards and opens doors to recognition and prominence within their chosen field.

The pursuit of financial stability and the aspiration to secure the top prize are common themes among board exam takers, reflecting a blend of ambition and practicality. Participants desire visibility and acknowledgment within the industry to carve out a distinct identity and capitalize on early career opportunities (Yang & Gentry, 2022). Despite moments of self-doubt, the dreams of these individuals are fueled by a yearning for recognition and prominence, highlighting the importance of external validation in their career aspirations.

The implications of desiring recognition and opportunities among board exam takers underscore the human pursuit of validation and achievement within their chosen profession. Beyond the practical benefits of financial stability and immediate career prospects, these aspirations reflect deeper personal aspirations and the longing to make a mark in their field. For many, achieving top honors represents more than just a milestone; it signifies overcoming challenges, proving one's capabilities, and gaining respect among peers and mentors. This journey towards recognition and visibility also highlights the importance of support systems, mentorship, and community encouragement in nurturing and sustaining these ambitions. Ultimately, the pursuit of recognition and opportunities not only shapes career trajectories but also fosters personal growth, resilience, and a sense of fulfillment derived from pursuing and achieving one's dreams.

3.2.3. Reason behind Their Success

This theme delves into the factors contributing to the exceptional performance, the participants' narratives unveil a tapestry of familial support, personal drive, and altruistic aspirations. Central to their achievements is the unwavering encouragement and belief instilled by their families and peers, fueling their determination to excel. Participants consistently highlight how their families' and classmates' support and motivation played a crucial role in their success. This support network instilled confidence and a sense of responsibility, driving them to honor the sacrifices of their parents and ensure a better future.

Participants 6 and 7 are deeply motivated by a sense of responsibility towards their parents, driven by a desire to honor their sacrifices and secure a better future. This filial devotion acts as a guiding force, propelling them to

strive harder and achieve success for themselves and their loved ones. The influence of mentorship and the desire to pay it forward resonate strongly in their stories.

Moreover, participants were inspired by the guidance of supportive lecturers and the aspiration to empower future generations to extend their dreams beyond personal accolades to encompass a vision of mentorship and positive impact within their chosen field. Participant 10 exemplifies this by aspiring to mentor future criminologists, inspired by lecturers who played a significant role in their journey. These are indicated in the following interview responses:

"Yes, my family and classmates are the ones who fuel my eagerness to top the board exam because they saw my potential. They encourage and motivate me to do harder; their words are motivating me." (P6)

"There are lots of aspirations, but the most important thing that comes to my mind is the efforts of my parents. Aside from the goal to enter the agencies, I do not want to waste my family's effort, so I strive hard to attain this achievement so they can be proud." (P7)

"It is one of my aspirations to do my best during board exams. During the review, I did not know what would happen after the exam, but I met some lecturers who inspired me, and, on that day, I dreamed of being one of them someday, of becoming one of the topnotchers I want to use what I have learned to in order help those aspiring criminologist and topnotchers." (P10)

"Since childhood, my sole inspiration has been to secure a good job to repay my parents for their sacrifices and provide them with comfortable lives in the future." (P11)

In analyzing the factors contributing to the success of board exam takers, familial support, personal drive, and altruistic aspirations emerge as crucial influences. The unwavering encouragement and belief instilled by families and peers significantly fuel the participants' determination to excel. Motivated by a deep sense of responsibility towards their parents, individuals are propelled by a desire to honor their sacrifices and secure a better future, guiding their pursuit of success.

Furthermore, mentorship and paying it forward are recurring themes in the aspirations of board exam takers, reflecting a desire to empower future generations and make a positive impact within their chosen field. Inspired by supportive lecturers and mentors, participants envision a future where they can utilize their knowledge and experiences to guide and assist aspiring professionals (Hobson et al., 2020).

The success of board exam takers is influenced by a combination of personal drive, familial support, and a sense of responsibility towards loved ones. Participants draw strength from the encouragement of their families and peers, channeling this support into their pursuit of academic excellence (Özdere, 2021). By embracing mentorship and a spirit of giving back, board exam takers aim for personal growth and aspire to positively impact their communities and professions.

The implications of understanding the reasons behind the success of board exam takers are profound, reflecting the human aspect of achievement and aspiration. By recognizing the pivotal roles played by familial support, personal

determination, and altruistic motivations, we gain insight into the deeper values that drive individuals to excel. These narratives highlight the importance of emotional connections and relationships in shaping academic and professional journeys. They underscore how the encouragement of loved ones and peers not only boosts confidence but also instills a sense of purpose and responsibility, guiding individuals through challenges and setbacks.

Moreover, the aspiration to mentor future generations and make a positive impact reveals a commitment to collective growth and community support, emphasizing the interconnectedness of personal success with broader societal benefits. Ultimately, these stories illuminate the resilience, empathy, and determination that underpin success, offering lessons in perseverance and the transformative power of support networks in navigating life's challenges and achieving meaningful goals.

3.3. Design

3.3.1. Comprehensive Learning Techniques

The comprehensive learning techniques emphasize the diverse and thorough study methods employed by participants who prioritize understanding over mere memorization, often utilizing multiple modalities like reading, writing, and visual aids to reinforce learning. This dynamic blend of active engagement and adaptability is evident in their study routines. For instance, Participant 1 emphasizes the importance of mnemonics and detailed note-taking during lectures, while Participant 2 finds value in combining reading with listening to lectures for deeper comprehension. This holistic approach that combines comprehension, repetition, and concept mastery helps participants cultivate a deep understanding of complex subjects. These are indicated in the following interview responses:

"I do readings and comprehensions. I use mnemonics to memorize or not to forget, especially if it is processes or enumerations, and I take notes even if it has references. If they provide important information during a lecture, I write it on my notes." (P1)

"The most effective methodology is to read first and listen to the lecture because sometimes there are things that we cannot understand by just reading it. By attending lectures, you can ask the lecturer and even by just listening to the discussion." (P2)

Furthermore, participants design their study routines to emphasize perseverance and flexibility, adjusting their strategies over time to align with their evolving needs. For Participant 6, example adapts by integrating reading with writing and video-based learning to enhance retention. Participant 7, used an iterative process of exploration and refinement allows them to optimize their learning experiences, paving the way for comprehensive understanding and academic success. These are indicated in the following interview responses:

"I have used all the techniques and strategies, but as time goes by while continuing my study, I have discovered my needs. When I am just reading it, it will not inculcate in my mind, but when I read and write, it results in being the most effective for me or watching videos and taking down notes. That was the technique I used." (P6)

"I comprehended it and made the concept so that, however, the form of the question, I can still answer it correctly. I never stop reading the materials if I have not got the concept; I do not read it again because I already understand it." (P7)

The use of varied study techniques is a common theme. Participant 4 incorporates note-taking, understanding content, using flashcards, and applying the Pomodoro technique to manage study sessions effectively and avoid burnout. Participant 11 and Participant 5 employs repetition and reinforcement through flashcards, reviewing key information regularly to ensure retention. These are indicated in the following interview responses:

"The techniques I have applied are taking notes and understanding what I have read because the board exam is more on content. I also made many paper flashcards. The next tip is that Comoro uses techniques because it is so hard to study straight; you may burn out so the techniques help me because I am too lazy to study, but I still do it. Mnemonics are also useful in remembering the keyword." (P4)

"The study techniques I used are read, read, and read, then find material on the internet that serves the latest. I do not read books, so that is a shortcut. I prefer to read thick books and not read Questions and answers." (P5)

"Familiarizing oneself with every term, parlance, and rule is no easy feat; it requires repetition and reinforcement. Simply reading once will not suffice. I follow a straightforward strategy: I write important information on flashcards and review them before bed." (P11)

In exploring learning techniques, participants demonstrate a range of strategies tailored to their styles and needs. From traditional methods like note-taking and reading to innovative approaches such as mnemonics and flashcards, each technique is a tool for knowledge retention and understanding. The design of their study routines reflects a blend of active engagement and adaptability, prioritizing understanding over mere memorization (Bakaç, 2022). Participants cultivate a deep understanding of complex subjects by embracing a holistic approach that combines comprehension, repetition, and concept mastery (Gharghani et al., 2019).

Participants' success in their academic pursuits is attributed to the effective implementation of various learning strategies and techniques. Individuals enhance their comprehension and retention of key concepts by incorporating methods such as mnemonics, note-taking, and active engagement with course materials (Hanawi et al., 2022). Through perseverance, adaptability, and a focus on understanding, participants navigate their academic journeys with resilience and purpose, ultimately achieving comprehensive learning outcomes (Mazzetti et al., 2020).

The implication of these diverse learning techniques underscores the importance of personalized study approaches in fostering deep comprehension and retention among learners. By embracing methods that suit their individual learning styles and needs, participants not only enhance their academic performance but also cultivate lifelong skills in adaptability and self-directed learning. This approach not only prepares them for academic success but also equips them with the resilience and flexibility needed to navigate future educational and professional challenges effectively.

Thus, promoting a variety of effective learning strategies can empower students to achieve comprehensive understanding and thrive in their educational pursuits.

3.3.2. Strategic Time Management

This theme emphasizes the critical role that effective scheduling and prioritization play in the success of the participants. These high achievers meticulously allocate their time to balance intensive study sessions, rest, and practical experience, ensuring comprehensive preparation without burnout. Participants employ strategies such as setting weekly quotas, dividing study sessions into specific time slots, and establishing routines that balance Study with leisure.

For instance, Participant 2 implements a weekly quota system, allocating specific areas to focus on each week and adjusting the duration based on progress. Participant 8 emphasizes the importance of time management due to the proximity of graduation and licensure exams, creating a weekly reading plan and self-evaluation system to test comprehension. Participant 9 adopts a structured daily schedule, dedicating four hours each morning and afternoon for review, followed by leisure activities in the evening as a reward. These are indicated in the following interview responses:

"Yes, and I think it is a must to organize the subjects. It would help if you had a quota for every week you could finish a specific area. What I did before, in my first reading, was allocate one area every week. That is what I did, but later on, as it continued, the duration of time was reduced; I can do even three days to read one area." (P2)

"The number one is time management; you need to have time management because we do not have enough time to prepare because the month of graduation is near with the licensure examination day. What I did was think of what I would read this week. At the same time, after reading a specific area, I will evaluate myself to test my understanding in a particular area." (P8)

"I review for four hours in the morning and four hours in the afternoon I made as my work, and afterward I rewarded myself by giving time for myself, from 6 pm I will whatever I want to do." (P9)

The designs of their study routines prioritize efficiency and productivity, with self-assessment serving as a feedback mechanism to gauge comprehension and progress. Participant 10 employs a systematic approach, arranging study periods from hardest to easiest subjects dedicating more time to challenging areas. Participant 11 highlights the importance of understanding the exact amount of time left for preparation and meticulously planning daily study hours, sleep, and hobbies. These are indicated in the following interview responses:

"My academic strategy is always systematic, even when I am still in college; I do arrange the two weeks per area from hardest for me down to easiest because I focus on such area that was hard for me because it will take longer time so it was the guide I have followed during my preparation until in review center." (P10)

"I have always believed that understanding the exact amount of time—be it in months, days, hours, or even seconds—is crucial in your preparation. It is all about effective time management. You need to plan how many hours you will dedicate to studying each day, how many hours you will allocate for sleep, and how much time you will spend on your hobbies." (P11)

Research supports these findings, highlighting the effectiveness of meticulous planning and structured time allocation. The importance of strategic time management in preparing for licensure examinations. Participants'

strategies reflect traditional and innovative approaches, focusing on setting weekly quotas, dividing study sessions, and balancing Study with leisure (Villaflares, 2023).

Furthermore, the iterative process of refining time management strategies underscores a commitment to continuous improvement and success in academic pursuits (Schwitzman-Gerst, 2022). Their designs demonstrate a commitment to optimizing their study experiences, ensuring effective utilization of time and resources towards achieving their academic goals (Haryanto et al., 2022). The success of participants in their academic pursuits is attributed to the effective implementation of various time management strategies (Wheeler et al., 2021).

The implications of strategic time management extend beyond academic success to encompass personal growth and well-being, as participants not only optimize their study routines but also cultivate habits that promote balance and self-care. By allocating time for both intensive study and leisure activities, individuals foster resilience and prevent burnout, enhancing their overall quality of life during rigorous preparation periods. This holistic approach not only supports academic achievement but also nurtures habits that can benefit their professional careers and personal relationships, emphasizing the importance of time well-spent in pursuing both professional goals and personal fulfillment.

3.3.3. Self-discipline

Self-discipline is the cornerstone of success for top-notch Criminologist Licensure Examinations, as it enables them to stay focused and committed to their study regimen despite distractions or challenges. These individuals highlight a steadfast commitment to prioritizing Study over distractions, emphasizing the need for discipline as the cornerstone of effective learning. Participants acknowledge that self-discipline is the foundation upon which other aspects of their academic journey, such as time management and consistency, are built. They recognize the importance of resisting temptations like mobile gaming or social media scrolling in favor of focused study sessions.

Participant 8 highlights the necessity of discipline in conjunction with time management, using self-discipline to resist distractions like mobile games and social media. Participant 10 underscores that discipline and consistency are essential, noting that no amount of materials or good teachers can substitute for self-discipline. Participant 11 emphasizes prioritizing knowledge acquisition over indulging in temporary comforts, underscoring discipline's paramount role in the academic process. These are indicated in the following interview responses:

"Time after reading a specific area, I will evaluate myself to test my understanding of a particular area. Discipline is also essential; you must discipline the reviewee or student. Self-discipline is where everything starts, from time management to everything. For example, self-discipline is, instead of playing ML, you may use it in reading instead of scrolling on Facebook." (P8)

"Discipline and consistency, no matter how many materials you have, no matter how good the teachers you have in college days and your lecturer in the review center, if you have no discipline, then it is useless, so you need to be disciplined. You have to follow your schedule, discipline yourself in listening and attending classes because your enemy is yourself during those days." (P10)

"Discipline is paramount in this process. Always prioritize acquiring knowledge over indulging in distractions that offer only temporary comfort." (P11)

Prioritizing Study over distractions and maintaining discipline are highlighted as foundational for effective learning (Santos & Marasigan, 2021). Self-discipline is the cornerstone for academic success, such as time management and consistency (Adewoye & Olaseni, 2022). Participants demonstrate a disciplined approach by resisting temptations like mobile gaming or social media scrolling and focusing on knowledge acquisition (Kurniawan et al., 2022).

Participants stress the personal responsibility associated with self-discipline, emphasizing the need to resist distractions and prioritize acquiring knowledge (Ngampo, 2021). Self-discipline is linked to higher learning outcomes and is a key factor in academic achievement (Abbas, 2019). The ability to remain dedicated, focused, and consistent in efforts is crucial for academic progress and success (Leijten, 2024).

The implication of self-discipline goes beyond academic success to shape individuals' character and resilience. By cultivating self-discipline, participants not only enhance their study habits but also develop invaluable life skills such as perseverance and focus. This journey of self-discipline fosters personal growth, instilling a sense of accountability and responsibility in managing their time and priorities effectively. Moreover, by resisting distractions and prioritizing knowledge acquisition, individuals build confidence in their abilities and strengthen their commitment to achieving their goals, both academically and in their future careers. Ultimately, self-discipline empowers individuals to navigate challenges with determination and integrity, setting a foundation for lifelong learning and achievement.

3.4. Destiny

3.4.1. Personal Preparation and Mindset

Beyond mere academic readiness, these individuals prioritize cultivating a positive and resilient mindset, believing in their abilities to tackle challenges effectively. Achieving top ranks in exams requires a personalized approach and diligent preparation.

Participants emphasize understanding individual needs and creating effective strategies. They highlight the importance of staying humble and recognizing that learning is continuous. Being informed about the exam process, setting clear goals, and breaking them into actionable steps are crucial.

Participant 2 discusses the importance of knowing oneself and designing appropriate strategies, emphasizing that continuous learning is essential. Participant 3 advises being well-informed about the exam process, setting goals, and taking actionable steps. Participant 5 stresses the significance of early preparation, building a strong foundation from the first year. These are indicated in the following interview responses:

"Knowing yourself and designing strategies appropriate to your needs, I can say that if that is what you did, it is not difficult to be one of the topnotchers. We should not assume that we already know everything because there are still things we do not know." (P2)

"My advice is to be informed; they should know the necessary things about the board exam. If they already know it, they should understand the step-by-step process, set a goal, and divide it into valuable actions. After being informed, goal setting and then action." (P3)

"The first thing that I can recommend is, as early as a first year, you have to prepare yourself already and do not think that you will study in the fourth year since others pass the exam even if they study in the fourth year. You have to build your foundation because if you have the foundation, when you reach your fourth year, you will review it. After all, what happens to others when they are in the review center is not a review but the first view." (P5)

Participant 6 highlights the necessity of studying smarter and maintaining humility. Participant 8 points out the need to set goals, stay focused, and be willing to sacrifice leisure time. Participant 9 emphasizes finding a deeper purpose and loving the subject to stay motivated. These are indicated in the following interview responses:

"Study smarter; it is necessary to read all the criminal law books just to be serious about studying, and the eagerness to read is still present. Do not think that you already know everything. You have to remain humble. I have set hours in reviewing, 8 hours to 17 hours for six months." (P6)

"To those aspiring criminologist, you must set your goal, you have to focus on your goal, and next is they are willing to sacrifice their time, particularly in going out because others who do reviews are always wanting to go out, but it is okay if they do it once in a while to relax because we are already bombarded with our readings and studying." (P8)

"You must find a reason you want to be a topnotcher because if your goal is to show off or make your name well-known, you must find a deeper purpose. Second, you must love what you are doing because the preparation is difficult, especially if you are not used to the prep methodologies that you will do; you have to start from scratch. It is tough, and it could lose your motivation." (P9)

Participant 10 underscores the importance of self-discipline, consistency, and paying attention to subjects during college. Participant 11 advises setting high goals and devising a plan to achieve them, stressing that a mindset aiming for excellence is essential. These are indicated in the following interview responses:

"Trust yourself, set a goal, and believe it is possible; self-discipline and consistency are essential. I have told my students now that while they are still in college, they should pay attention to their subject because they cannot escape it in the board exam; they can always encounter it repeatedly." (P10)

"Take the time to identify your goals and devise a plan. If you want to achieve a passing grade of 75, you might as well not bother. Students who diligently study during their college days can pass the examination without much additional review. However, if your goal is to top the exam, you must hustle." (P11)

In exploring personal preparation and mindset, participants emphasize the pivotal role of self-awareness and strategic planning. They underscore the significance of self-knowledge and tailored strategies, emphasizing the importance of humility and continuous learning in achieving success (Iqbal et al., 2021). This mindset fosters a sense of readiness and adaptability, ensuring that individuals are prepared to navigate the complexities of the board exam (Iyengar et al., 2022).

Furthermore, participants perceive discipline as a personal obligation, acknowledging that success fundamentally depends on their capacity to maintain dedication and consistency in their endeavors (Sorbet & Notar, 2022) by prioritizing knowledge acquisition and resisting the temptation of momentary comforts. They exhibit a disciplined approach crucial for overcoming the challenges of academic pursuits.

The implications of personal preparation and mindset extend far beyond academic success, influencing individuals' overall growth and resilience. By emphasizing self-awareness and strategic planning, participants not only enhance their academic readiness but also cultivate valuable life skills such as perseverance and adaptability. Ultimately, this mindset of readiness and disciplined preparation empowers individuals not only to excel in their academic endeavors but also to navigate future challenges with resilience and optimism, shaping them into well-rounded professionals and individuals.

3.4.2. Effective Teaching Strategies

These top achievers employ various pedagogical approaches, such as collaborative learning. Participants emphasized the importance of adaptability and student-centered approaches. Participant 10 stresses the need for active student engagement and interaction with the instructor, recognizing the diversity of learning styles.

Participant 2 echoes this sentiment, emphasizing the importance of understanding where students learn best and adapting teaching strategies accordingly. Participant 3 highlights the significance of motivation and encouragement in creating a supportive learning environment, emphasizing the need to balance information delivery with students' career aspirations. Participant 7 underscores the importance of aligning teaching with professional standards and licensure requirements, recognizing the value of incorporating content specified by regulatory boards. These are indicated in the following interview responses:

"When it comes to educators, you have to consider some things. An educator should understand where their students learn best. You have to create a strategy that is suitable for your students. Do not rely on traditional strategies. Knowing that we have different students, we need to adjust the approaches we use for our students to learn." (P2)

"The educator should have a motivational approach, encourage them, and give them equal attention. Also, we should balance the information we give them so they know what to expect in the profession because maybe they want something and are not criminology." (P3)

"As for the educator, it will help them too in the way of knowing what the lessons they need to teach to their students specified in the PRC board; it can also give the educator the idea of the manner coverage they will teach the students." (P7)

Moreover, Participant 11 emphasizes the importance of educators investing time in sourcing valuable materials and refining teaching methods based on data gathered from successful students. Collectively, these insights underscore the importance of personalized and adaptive teaching approaches that cater to students' diverse needs and preferences, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of teaching strategies. These are indicated in the following interview responses:

"What I have learned during college is that the students should be active, and there should be an interaction between the students and the instructor. As we all know, we have different learning styles, so we as educators should choose or utilize various learning styles." (P10)

"Instructors should invest time in sourcing valuable materials, developing effective study aids, and refining teaching methods based on the data gathered from topnotchers." (P11)

By adapting teaching methodologies to cater to these differences, educators can create inclusive and engaging learning environments that promote deeper understanding and retention of course material. Understanding students' individual needs and learning preferences is emphasized, with educators encouraged to assess where their students learn best and employ diverse teaching strategies accordingly. Moving beyond traditional approaches and tailoring teaching strategies to accommodate various learning styles can enhance the efficacy of teaching (Sengsouliya et al., 2019).

Balancing the information presented and aligning it with students' career aspirations is crucial in helping students make informed decisions about their future path. Additionally, aligning teaching strategies with professional standards and licensure requirements is recommended to ensure students are adequately prepared for their future careers and licensure examinations.

The implications of effective teaching strategies go beyond academic achievement, profoundly impacting students' personal growth and professional development. By adopting student-centered approaches that cater to diverse learning styles and motivations, educators not only enhance subject understanding but also foster a sense of empowerment and engagement among learners. This personalized approach helps students build confidence in their abilities, navigate challenges with resilience, and develop a lifelong love for learning. Ultimately, effective teaching strategies that prioritize student interaction and motivation contribute to creating a supportive learning environment where students feel valued, motivated, and prepared to succeed in their chosen fields.

3.4.3. Career Opportunities and Professional Recognition

Career opportunities and professional recognition are often abundant for Criminologist Licensure Examination topnotchers due to their exceptional performance and demonstrated expertise in the field. Being a topnotcher in the criminologist licensure examination significantly enhances career opportunities and professional recognition. Participants highlight how achieving this status often leads to immediate recognition and numerous job offers from various institutions, including review centers and educational establishments.

Participant 1 discusses how being a topnotcher attracts attention from review centers, opening up opportunities for lecturing positions. Participant 2 emphasizes the financial stability gained from being hired automatically, which greatly supports their family despite humble beginnings. Participant 3 shares their experience of being hired by their alma mater as a regular faculty member and conducting review lectures nationwide. Participant 11 highlights the advantage of being prioritized in job offers, mentioning their immediate entry into the Philippine National Police (PNP). These are indicated in the following interview responses:

“After the result of the board exam, sir, many review centers contacted me to their review lecturer; being a topnotcher, it will open many opportunities.” (P1)

“Being a topnotcher will gain popularity, but the most rewarding part is being hired automatically. As of now, I earn enough income to support my family, considering I come from a low-income family.” (P2)

“As a top-notcher, it is easy for me to find a job, or there are many job offers from many institutions. My alma mater hired me as a regular faculty member, and I conducted a review lecture at different places in the country.” (P3)

“I never expected that being a topnotcher would open many opportunities and be prioritized with job offers and meeting with other people in the profession. In my case, I entered the PNP immediately because of my edge over the other applicants.” (P11)

Being a topnotcher in the board exam can lead to various opportunities and advantages regarding career advancement and job prospects. Topnotchers often receive attention from review centers and institutions seeking their expertise. The recognition as a topnotcher can enhance one's popularity and may lead to automatic hiring in certain cases, providing a significant advantage in securing employment (Pedulla & Pager, 2019). This advantage is further supported by the notion that being referred for a job signals quality and potential productivity to employers (Xing-gui et al., 2020).

Topnotchers typically find it easier to secure job offers from multiple institutions, allowing them to choose from various opportunities (Kapu et al., 2019). This advantage can lead to positions in prestigious organizations, such as alma maters, and may also open doors for additional roles like conducting review lectures in different locations (Magnier-Watanabe et al., 2020). The employment outcomes for topnotchers are often positive, with a higher likelihood of being hired and standing out among other applicants.

The impact of being a topnotcher extends beyond just job opportunities. It can also influence job satisfaction and well-being, as individuals in such positions may experience higher levels of job satisfaction due to the recognition and opportunities that come with their achievement (Bui, 2019). Additionally, the recognition of being a topnotcher can lead to increased happiness on the job, especially when accompanied by rewards, skill development opportunities, support, and recognition (Karaoglu et al., 2021).

The implications of being a topnotcher in the Criminologist Licensure Examination extend deeply into personal and professional realms, profoundly impacting individuals' lives beyond immediate career opportunities. For many, achieving top ranks not only validates years of hard work and dedication but also enhances self-esteem and confidence. It instills a sense of pride and accomplishment that can positively influence their outlook on future challenges and endeavors. Moreover, the recognition and respect garnered from peers and society can foster a supportive network and community, providing ongoing encouragement and validation. This holistic impact underscores how being a topnotcher not only boosts career prospects but also enriches personal well-being and fulfillment, paving the way for continued success and growth in both professional and personal spheres.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

These topnotchers' success is evidence of their extraordinary adaptability and tenacity. They successfully overcame major financial and academic obstacles, highlighting the importance of both strong external support networks especially from family and educational institutions—and internal resilience. Their experiences demonstrate that tenacity and a proactive attitude are key components of success, which goes beyond intelligence alone.

Additionally, the study shows that both internal and external factors contribute to academic success. A strong internal motivator is the desire for personal development and success, but it is frequently heightened by the desire for professional recognition and a strong sense of duty to their families. A key element of their quest for success is the interaction between their personal aspirations and their obligations to their families.

Lastly, the accomplishments of the topnotchers are closely related to their methodical and strategic approach to education. They used rigorous self-discipline, strategic time management, and comprehensive learning strategies. These techniques provide a clear road map for success and go beyond conventional study habits. This emphasizes the value of a customized and methodical approach to preparation for prospective students. In order to create a more effective and encouraging learning environment for all criminology students, educators must embrace dynamic, student-centered teaching strategies that encourage resilience, motivation, and practical learning skills.

5. Future Suggestions

- 1) Follow the long-term career path of these topnotchers to see how academic success is translated into professional success and leadership roles.
- 2) Investigate the specific coping mechanisms employed by these students concerning handling financial and academic stress, especially ways these techniques could be taught to other students.
- 3) Correlate the study habits of the topnotchers with those of the average performers to establish the major dividing lines drawn in their learning and preparation for examinations.
- 4) Analyze the role of mentorship and peer support in the academic life of criminology students and how some formal programs may be constructed to strengthen the relationships.

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Author consented to the publication of this research work.

Authors' contributions

Author's independent contribution.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was provided by participants to voluntarily join the study after receiving sufficient information concerning the purpose and procedure.

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