

Lived Experiences of Criminology Graduates Balancing Work and Board Exam Preparation: A Phenomenological Study

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DOI: Under Assignment



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Article Received: 05 March 2025

Article Accepted: 12 May 2025

Article Published: 23 May 2025

ABSTRACT

In recent years, the integration of work and board exam preparation has intensified due to economic demands and professional aspirations, significantly affecting criminology graduates' well-being and readiness for taking board examinations. This study gained insights into the personal experiences, adaptive strategies, and coping mechanisms of individuals managing both responsibilities simultaneously. The research was conducted in Labason, Zamboanga del Norte, where ten criminology graduates were selected using purposive and snowball sampling methods. A researcher-made Interview Guide was used to gather relevant data. Utilizing a qualitative approach with a phenomenological transcendental design, data were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) data analysis technique. Findings showed that participants faced significant challenges in balancing work, review, and health, but managed to persevere through strategic time management, self-initiative, and strong family and social support. Flexible work schedules and encouragement from their support systems helped create a nurturing environment for both professional and personal growth. Thus, the integration of flexible work conditions, along with emotional and logistical support, plays a vital role in enabling board examinees to sustain their preparation and pursue their licensure goals.

Keywords: Board Examinees; Board Exam Preparation; Coping Mechanism; Criminology; Motivation; Professional Growth; Sacrifices; Strength; Time Management; Working.

1. Introduction

The journey to passing board examinations is a critical milestone for many students, symbolizing a pathway to professional advancement and societal recognition. This process presents significant challenges, especially for those balancing employment and academic demands. Working board examinees often struggle with limited time and energy, making resilience, determination, and resourcefulness essential for success. Studies highlight that resilience—the ability to adapt positively in the face of stress—plays a crucial role in navigating such pressures (Cheng, 2024; Curan et al., 2019). Achieving success in the Criminology Licensure Examination (CLE) represents not only a personal goal for aspiring criminologists but also fulfills a crucial role in maintaining the credibility of the country's justice system.

Republic Act No. 11131 imposing rigorous qualifications to guarantee that only capable and morally sound individuals join the profession. This commitment to high standards was evident in the February 2025 examination results from the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC), where 22,245 of the 36,768 candidates passed—resulting in a 60.50% national passing rate, a significant rise from the historical average of 34.5% (PRC, 2025). Among the top-performing institutions, Visayas State University Tolosa stood out, with 85.60% of their first-time takers passing the exam—highlighting the value of strong academic support systems (Craig et al, 2022). Additionally, managing multiple responsibilities has been shown to require resilience, which plays a key role in academic and licensure exam success (Canto et al., 2023; 2021; Alves et al., 2024). In the end, balancing work, study, and exam preparation requires resilience—a crucial factor in overcoming the pressures that come with this challenging process.

Criminology graduates preparing for the board examinations while balancing work responsibilities embody the resilience and adaptability essential for success. These individuals face unique challenges, including managing time for review sessions after long work hours and coping with the physical and mental toll of their dual roles. According to Erwin (2023), criminology graduates in the Philippines often pursue employment in security services or other related fields while preparing for licensure exams, driven by the need to support themselves financially. Despite these hurdles, their dedication to achieving professional recognition and contributing to public safety exemplifies the Filipino spirit of perseverance. The cultural values of "bayanihan" (community support) and "diskarte" (strategic resourcefulness) often underpin their journey, enabling them to find creative solutions to challenges and remain steadfast in their goals.

The study on the lived experiences of criminology graduates balancing work and board exam preparation highlights the challenges they face and the coping strategies they employ. It offers insights into time management, financial struggles, mental well-being, and effective study methods. This research is valuable for academic institutions, review centers, and policymakers in developing flexible review programs and financial support systems to help working graduates succeed (Fuertes et al., 2023).

In the Philippine context, many criminology graduates must work while preparing for the Criminologist Licensure Examination (CLE) due to financial constraints (Admin, 2023). This dual responsibility requires resilience, time management, and strong family support—values deeply rooted in Filipino culture (Santos et al., 2022; Tus, 2021; Tang & Zhu, 2024). The unique challenges faced by students in regions like Zamboanga del Norte underscore the need for tailored interventions that consider cultural, economic, and institutional factors to support their academic success.

The knowledge gap in this study centers on the lived experiences of working criminology board examinees in rural areas, particularly in Labason, Zamboanga del Norte, who are juggling full-time jobs while preparing for the board examination. Although there are existing studies on working students and board examinees, these are often treated as separate groups, leaving out those who face the dual challenge of being both of how these individuals manage their responsibilities, stay motivated, and cope with the demands of both roles. Exploring this area is crucial to create support mechanisms and policies that truly address the realities of their situation.

1.1. Study Objectives

This research study explored the lived experiences of working board examinees, focusing on their perseverance under the dual pressure of professional responsibilities and academic demands. Specifically, this research answered to the following questions:

- 1) What experience do criminology graduate face while preparing for the board examination?
- 2) How do criminology graduate manage their time while balancing board examination preparation and other responsibilities?
- 3) How do personal and external support systems influence their perseverance during board exam preparation?

2. Methods

This study utilized a qualitative approach through a phenomenological research design. This approach was utilized to examine the lived experiences of working board examinees, focusing on their perseverance while managing the dual pressures of employment and licensure exam preparation. This study was conducted in one of the Higher Education Institutions in Zamboanga del Norte, located in the northern part of the Zamboanga Peninsula Region, known for its vibrant community and educational institutions. As of the 2020 census, Labason had a population of 42,859 people with a total land area of 237.59 km², resulting in a population density of approximately 180 inhabitants per square kilometer. This educational institution served as a key academic establishment in the area, catering to a diverse student population, including working students who strived to balance their academic and professional responsibilities.

In the study, the researcher employed purposive sampling to select 10 participants based on the following criteria: (1) criminology graduates who are currently employed in a part-time or full-time capacity while enrolled in board review classes or preparing for the Criminologist Licensure Examination (CLE); (2) actively pursuing licensure in their field; (3) have experienced balancing work responsibilities and exam preparation for at least six months prior to the examination; and (4) willingness to participate in the study.

The researcher collected data using an interview guide that included an introduction, study overview, opening question, core questions, and a closing question. This guide was carefully crafted to align with the study's objectives and ensure clarity and relevance. To encourage open and meaningful responses, the questions were translated into the local language, making the interviews more accessible and reflective of participants' genuine experiences. Ethical considerations were strictly observed, with informed consent obtained from all participants, who were reminded of their right to withdraw at any point without consequences. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained in accordance with Republic Act 10173.

3. Results and Discussion

This study involved ten Criminology graduates from Labason, Zamboanga del Norte, who were employed part-time or full-time while preparing for the Criminologist Licensure Examination (CLE). Each had at least six months of experience balancing work and exam preparation. Participants, aged 21 to 26, held various jobs in security, administration, sales, and local government, working between 20 to 48 hours per week.

3.1. Sustaining Motivation amid Struggles of Time, Energy, and Long-Term Preparation

The lived experiences of working criminology graduates revealed a consistent and resilient drive to persevere in board exam preparation, despite significant constraints in time and energy. The primary source of this motivation stemmed from a strong vision of career advancement and professional fulfillment.

Many participants emphasized a future-oriented mindset as their key motivator for pursuing licensure while employed. These are the participants answer:

"I decided to take the board exam while working because I know that if I pass the board exam, many opportunities will come my way." P2

"I decided to take the Criminology board exam for my future, so I can apply for a job if God gives me the chance to pass." P4

"I decided to take the Criminology exam because I don't want to end up just being a graduate," P9

"I made the decision because I really want to pass so I can become a police officer." P10

These demonstrate that internal motivation, clear goal-setting, and a deep desire for a better future were powerful driving forces that helped participants navigate the dual demands of employment and review preparation. However, managing limited time and coping with physical exhaustion were common and recurring struggles. Participant 1 remarked:

"It's really all about time management — you can't handle everything while studying and working." P1

"While working, it's really hard to manage time and study for the board exam," P4

"Working from morning until afternoon, then I study at night." P5

"During work, I try to memorize articles and so on because I don't have much time to review, I really have to double-time." P9

These reflections highlight the mental and physical toll of balancing work and study, showcasing the participants' discipline and perseverance. Moreover, the participants demonstrated remarkable patience and long-term commitment to their goals, even when the timeline for taking the exam extended beyond the typical period.

These are the statements of the participants:

"After I graduated, I stayed for about 1 month before starting my duty. So, I've been reviewing for 6 months while working, and now I'm going to file for the next board exam in 2025." P2

"It's almost 1 year after my graduation," P9

"After my graduation I started working while balancing my study until now." P10

These narratives highlight that sustained motivation is a key trait among working criminology graduates, who stay committed to licensure despite long preparation periods and overlapping responsibilities. Their persistence is driven by personal goals and intrinsic motivation. Disabato et al. (2019) emphasized the role of "grit"—consistent effort and passion over time—in achieving meaningful goals, while Rashid et al. (2020) noted that clear goals and time management improve academic performance.

Astudillo et al. (2023) found that Filipino working criminology graduates use coping strategies like studying during off-hours and seeking peer support to manage both work and exam prep. Similarly, Ballos et al. (2021) stressed the importance of planning and self-discipline in meeting academic demands. These studies collectively point to the value of self-regulation, peer support, and adaptive habits in maintaining focus and resilience under pressure. Many participants emphasized a strong future-oriented mindset as the reason behind their decision to pursue the board examination while employed. For instance, Participant 2 shared:

“I decided to take the board exam while working because I know that if I pass the board exam, many opportunities will come my way.”

Similarly, Participant 4 stated:

“I decided to take the Criminology board exam for my future, so I can apply for a job if God gives me the chance to pass.”

This was echoed by others such as Participant 9 who said

“I decided to take the Criminology exam because I don’t want to end up just being a graduate,” and Participant 10 who shared,

“I made the decision because I really want to pass so I can become a police officer.”

These responses suggest that internal motivation, goal-setting, and a desire for a better future were powerful forces that pushed them to overcome the difficulties of balancing work and exam preparation. However, the challenge of managing limited time and physical exhaustion was a recurring concern.

Participant 1 candidly remarked,

“It’s really all about time management — you can’t handle everything while studying and working.”

Participant 4 added,

“While working, it’s really hard to manage time and study for the board exam,” while Participant 5 described their daily routine as,

“Working from morning until afternoon, then I study at night.”

Participant 9 also illustrated the need for multitasking by saying,

“During work, I try to memorize articles and so on because I don’t have much time to review, I really have to double-time.”

These narratives highlight the physical and mental toll experienced by working examinees, demonstrating their resilience and discipline in pursuing licensure despite fatigue and time scarcity. Moreover, the participants displayed patience and long-term commitment to their goals, even when the timeline between graduation and exam filing extended beyond the usual period. As Participant 2 narrated,

“After I graduated, I stayed for about 1 month before starting my duty. So, I’ve been reviewing for 6 months while working, and now I’m going to file for the next board exam in 2025.”

Participant 9 similarly mentioned,

“It’s almost 1 year after my graduation,”

while Participant 10 expressed,

“After my graduation I start working while balancing my study until now.”

The participants' experiences reveal that a strong sense of purpose, internal motivation, and clear goal-setting were key factors driving their decision to pursue the Criminology board exam while working. Their deep desire for a better future, such as securing job opportunities or becoming a police officer, served as a powerful motivator despite the mental, physical, and time-related challenges they faced. While managing work duties and review preparation often led to fatigue and limited study time, their resilience, discipline, and long-term commitment remained evident. These findings reflect the importance of grit, self-regulation, and adaptive strategies in maintaining perseverance, particularly among graduates whose licensure journeys extend beyond traditional timelines.

3.2. Living the Journey of Self-Learning and Sacrifice

Living the journey of self-learning and sacrifice means advancing in one's academic goals with minimal external guidance, relying on internal drive and motivation, while accepting the trials and sacrifices involved. The participants' experiences highlight how they overcame time constraints, fatigue, and the absence of relaxation, all while making sacrifices to pursue their academic goals amidst the demands of life. Several participants described engaging in self-learning strategies to make up for the lack of formal review sessions. For example, Participants shared,

"I decided by studying YouTube videos about my subjects," P3,

"I wake up at 4:00 a.m. studying using reviewers and books." P2

This highlights the difficulty of maintaining a study routine under time constraints, as many participants made the most of every available moment to study. They shared,

"During work, I try to memorize articles. I really have to double-time." P9

"After work, I study for 2 hours," P6

"I'm working, then I sleep and wake up at dawn," P10

Showing how their daily routine revolved around multitasking, where they had to balance work, household chores, and study commitments. Likewise, Participant 8 shared,

"I jog and exercise after that prepare breakfast, and get my handouts ready," P8

This response indicates the physical discipline required to maintain a routine that blends both physical activity and study preparations for the criminology board exam. This highlights the intricate balance between mental and physical well-being in the preparation process. Another aspect of this theme is financial survival and personal responsibility. Participant remarked,

"It's my own decision while working," P8

"I decided to take the board exam while working as a gasoline boy to have some money saved up," P6

These narratives highlight the participants' sacrifices and self-reliance as they balance exam preparation with financial and physical demands. Despite challenging conditions, they exhibited discipline, motivation, and goal

orientation. Chen and Cohn (2021) note that working adults rely on intrinsic motivation, time management, and digital tools to succeed, while Lan (2019) emphasizes the value of self-directed, flexible learning. The participants' use of online resources and non-traditional study methods reflects these insights, showcasing their adaptability and commitment.

The theme of self-learning and sacrifice highlights the importance of self-discipline, intrinsic motivation, and resourcefulness in the success of working criminology graduates. Adapting, learning independently, and making personal sacrifices are key to balancing work and exam prep. The findings emphasize the need for support systems and accessible resources, such as digital platforms, to help students. Educational interventions should focus on self-regulation, time management, and flexible learning options to support working students.

3.3. Doing Intentional Sacrifices and Adjustments

Several participants shared a strong commitment to making personal sacrifices in pursuit of passing the criminology board exam. Participant 10 gave up social time to meet family expectations, while Participant 9 limited trips home to save on transportation costs and prioritize essentials like food. Participant 3 juggled work, parenting, and studies, carrying emotional guilt for being away from family. These accounts reveal the depth of dedication and the difficult choices working criminology graduates make to achieve their academic and professional goals.

These are their answers:

"I sacrificed hanging out with friends so I can study and make my parents happy and proud by passing the exam even if I have nothing." – P10

"I sacrificed going home often because the fare is expensive—I'd rather use that money to buy rice." – P9

"The biggest sacrifice is that I already have a family, so I'm working while studying. I'm far from my family and I keep thinking that I can't help them right now." – P3

Another group of participants, specifically Participants 1, 2, and 3, highlighted the strategic adjustments they made to their schedules to manage time and cope with life's unpredictability. Participant 2 adjusted their study time based on work demands, choosing to rest briefly before resuming study sessions. Participant 3 described studying in the evenings, even continuing until midnight when necessary. Participant 1 echoed the same strategy, shifting study sessions to the next day if unexpected interruptions occurred. These responses demonstrate a shared resilience and flexibility among participants, showing their commitment to continuously recalibrate their daily routines and still meet their academic goals.

These are their answers:

"I really study, sometimes I stay up late and even wake up at dawn—it's not easy..." – P2

"I adjust my time to 2 hours; I make adjustments if something happens, then continue studying up to 12 in the evening." – P3

"I had to adjust my study routine to 2 hours or sometimes just push it to the next day if my work demanded more time." – P1

Participants 2, 6, and 10 shared experiences of physical and emotional exhaustion. Participant 10 often fell asleep from fatigue but stayed committed to studying, while Participant 6 found work-related exhaustion the biggest challenge to academic focus. Participant 2 recalled an emotional breakdown from the pressure but chose to continue after resting. These stories reflect the intense strain they face and their unwavering determination to push through.

These are their answers:

"Sometimes, I fall asleep right away because I'm so tired, but I still push myself to study even though it's hard." – P10

"There was a time when I was really exhausted, and I couldn't handle it anymore, so I stopped studying. I also couldn't focus on work, and I cried, ma'am. After resting for a few hours, I went back to studying." – P2

"The biggest challenge is really the fatigue from work; after working long shifts, it's hard to focus on studying." – P6

The participants' experiences align with research by Gerald and Smith (2019), which highlights the time pressure, emotional stress, and financial hardship faced by working students. Those who adopt coping strategies like time management and internal motivation tend to succeed—mirroring the sacrifices and schedule adjustments made by the participants.

This implies that the overarching theme of "Doing Intentional Sacrifices and Adjustments" reflects the remarkable perseverance, adaptability, and emotional resilience of working criminology graduates. Their experiences highlight the urgent need for academic institutions to establish support systems that recognize the challenges of balancing work and licensure preparation. Providing flexible class schedules, access to mental health services, and financial aid can significantly lessen their burdens and empower them to succeed both academically and personally.

3.4. Drawing Strength from Family and Social Support

The role of family and social support emerged as a powerful and recurring theme among participants. For many, the emotional encouragement and sense of belonging offered by loved ones served as a vital source of resilience in the face of pressure, exhaustion, and financial burden.

"My family is the one who lifts my morale." P3

"I didn't give up because of my family. I draw strength from their support." P6

"Despite the struggles, I didn't give up. I always remember my family to support my motivation to continue pursuing my dreams." P4

All three participants (P3, P4, P6) express how emotional and moral support from family serves as the core source of strength to overcome struggles. Their responses strongly align in valuing emotional encouragement as

motivation. These experiences resonate with the findings of Lemos et al. (2024), which underscore how emotional support from family members significantly contributes to mental resilience and stress regulation during demanding periods like board exam preparation.

Some participants also pointed to the motivational and aspirational drive that family support, as such:

"I have siblings I need to help. It's good they are there to encourage me." P2

"It was my father's dream, but he couldn't continue that became my goal to fulfill his dream." P2

"Since I was in high school, I dreamed of becoming a police officer, so after graduation, I reviewed despite the hardships." P8

Both P2 and P8 express a strong sense of responsibility and aspiration tied to family—whether from fulfilling a parent's dream or supporting siblings. Their motivations are inspired by personal connections and familial goals.

These insights are supported by Kadiri (2024), who emphasized that family support enhances academic perseverance by nurturing a sense of accountability and long-term purpose.

"No matter how big the problems in life are, that's normal. It's okay to rest, but we should continue." P2

Reflects a mindset instilled by family encouragement, emphasizing a healthy outlook on struggles. P2 consistently demonstrates how family fosters mental toughness, not just emotional or aspirational motivation. This also ties back to Kadiri's view that positive reinforcement aids emotional regulation and coping.

Lemos et al. (2024) found that family support plays a crucial role in helping students manage academic challenges and develop resilience. This aligns with the participants' experiences, where encouragement from loved ones fueled their motivation and perseverance despite setbacks. Family systems provide emotional support, instill a sense of duty, and inspire persistence in pursuing educational goals. Participants like P3, P4, and P6 drew strength from their families, while P2 and P8 were driven by a sense of responsibility and long-term aspirations. P2 also emphasized the importance of mental resilience in overcoming challenges.

These findings imply that educational institutions and review centers may consider integrating family-inclusive strategies—such as counseling sessions or motivational programs involving family members—to reinforce student resilience and performance. Recognizing and harnessing the power of family support can greatly enhance student outcomes in high-pressure academic pursuits.

3.5. Having Networks as Emotional Anchors and Social Pillars

These support systems act as pillars of strength, offering encouragement, motivation, and emotional grounding to help students manage stress. Participants highlighted the crucial role of their families as emotional anchors, providing stability and support during mentally challenging times.

"My family encourages me because they want me to have a job in the future." P1

"They give me encouragement every time they see me very stressed." P9

Emotional support from family was key to participants' perseverance, with P1 focusing on future goals and P9 valuing real-time encouragement. This aligns with House and Biddle (1998), who highlight that family support reduces stress and enhances academic resilience. Participants also recognized the importance of friends, mentors, peers, and romantic partners as vital emotional and academic support systems.

These are their shared statements:

"My friends, peers, mentors, girlfriend, and parents always tell me to study so I can pass the criminology board exam." P6

"My friends always invite me to join study groups, and my family keeps telling me to really study." P1.

Both P6 and P1 highlight external encouragement, particularly focused on academic persistence. While P6 mentions verbal encouragement across different relationships, P1 adds the practical role of group study.

Unlike P1 and P6, who mentioned active academic encouragement, P2's narrative leans more toward emotional protection and mental care. This represents another vital layer of social support: helping to prevent burnout.

This is the statements of the participant:

"I never really felt that they pressured me—in fact, they tell me to rest and take things slowly." P2

This duality—encouraging study while promoting rest—reflects a holistic support approach that prioritizes well-being. Sisto et al. (2019) emphasize that family aids both motivation and emotional regulation, while Villarmia et al. (2021) highlight the importance of emotional and social support for reviewees balancing work and study. In high-stress environments, support systems serve as both buffers and energy sources, enhancing resilience and success.

This implies that experiences of participants reflect the intertwined roles of emotional encouragement, academic motivation, and psychological care offered by their support networks. Whether through words of encouragement, inclusion in study groups, reminders to rest, or long-term career aspirations, these emotional anchors and social pillars uplift students during moments of vulnerability and fatigue.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of 10 criminology graduates who were working while preparing for their board exams. Through the analysis of interview statements, five key themes emerged: Sustaining Motivation amid Struggles of Time; Energy, and Long-Term Preparation; Living the Journey of Self-Learning and Sacrifice; Doing Intentional Sacrifices and Adjustments; Drawing Strength from Family and Social Support; Having Networks as Emotional Anchors and Social Pillars.

The study revealed that the experiences of criminology graduates preparing for the board exam highlight the critical role of sustaining motivation amid the struggles of time, energy, and long-term preparation. Driven by personal goals and future aspirations, they navigate the journey of self-learning and sacrifice, relying on self-directed learning methods and making significant lifestyle adjustments. Graduates intentionally sacrifice

social and family time to accommodate study routines, adapting to unpredictable work schedules and physical exhaustion, while drawing strength from emotional support networks. Family, friends, mentors, and peers serve as essential emotional anchors, providing stability, motivation, and practical assistance to help graduates persevere through burnout and pressure.

In conclusion, criminology graduates preparing for the board exam face significant challenges, including time constraints, exhaustion, and limited resources. Despite these obstacles, they remain motivated through personal goals, self-directed learning, and sacrifices, demonstrating resilience and perseverance. Their ability to manage board exam preparation is further supported by intentional adjustments to their routines and the emotional strength drawn from family and social networks. Personal and external support systems are essential, providing both emotional encouragement and practical assistance, which help sustain their motivation and perseverance throughout the process.

The study hereby suggested the following: To Higher Education Institutions, Review Centers, and Working Students: Offer flexible review programs (e.g., weekend, evening, or online modules) to support working graduates struggling with time and exhaustion. This allows them to prepare effectively without compromising job responsibilities; To the Institution: Include time management and wellness workshops in pre-board preparation. These help board examinees reduce stress, build healthier routines, and manage physical and mental well-being; To the Institution and Review Center: Strengthen peer and family support through structured programs like mentorship, support groups, and relationship sessions to encourage emotional and motivational support for board takers; To Future Researchers: Future studies may explore how flexible review schedules affect working criminology graduates' academic performance and well-being. Research can also examine the effects of wellness training and support networks on exam success, and how institutional policies and career support influence outcomes. A long-term approach could assess how working while preparing impacts future careers.

5. Recommendation

Based on the study's findings, it is recommended that higher education institutions and review centers create flexible review programs, such as evening, weekend, or online modules, to accommodate working criminology graduates. Integrating time management and wellness workshops into the pre-board process could also help graduates develop healthier routines and manage stress more effectively. Additionally, strengthening family and peer support systems through mentorship programs and peer support groups can provide the emotional and practical support needed to navigate the challenges of board exam preparation. Future research could focus on the impact of flexible review schedules on academic success and well-being, explore the role of time management and wellness training in coping strategies, and assess the effectiveness of support networks in enhancing resilience and academic outcomes.

Declarations

Source of Funding

This study did not receive any grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing Interests Statement

The authors have not declared any conflict of interest.

Consent for publication

The authors declare that they consented to the publication of this study.

Consent to participate

All participants in this study voluntarily gave their informed consent prior to their involvement in the research.

Authors' contributions

Both the authors took part in literature review, analysis, and manuscript writing equally.

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