



A Three-Dimensional Analysis of First-Year Student Adjustment Difficulties Evidence from 600 Questionnaires and a Case Study

Lu Yang¹, Yang Gao^{*2}

¹School of Civil and Architectural Engineering, Panzhuhua University,
Panzhuhua 617000, China

²School of Mathematics and Computer Science, Panzhuhua University,
Panzhuhua 617000, China

*176211796@qq.com

Abstract. This study examines how first-year students experience adjustment difficulties in academic, daily-life, and interpersonal domains and proposes a co-ordinated support framework. Using 600 valid questionnaires collected from six Chinese universities and one typical case, the paper combines descriptive analysis with case interpretation to identify the main risk points, their transmission mechanism, and feasible intervention paths. The survey shows that 89.33% of respondents reported difficulty adapting to university learning rhythms, 46.67% were affected by climate and diet differences, 35.00% had trouble integrating into the class community, and 20.33% were reluctant to seek help when problems emerged. These risks often overlap and evolve from isolated discomfort into broader maladjustment. The findings indicate that adjustment problems arise from the interaction of environmental change, insufficient psychological regulation, and fragmented support from schools and families. Based on these results, the paper proposes a school-led, family-coordinated, student-centered framework with staged interventions before enrollment, during the first weeks, and across the first semester.

Keywords: first-year students; adjustment difficulties; academic adaptation; daily-life adaptation; interpersonal adjustment; support strategies

1 Introduction

The transition from school to university is a high-risk period because students must simultaneously adapt to faster academic rhythms, new living arrangements, and unfamiliar social networks. Recent large-scale student health data show that stress and help-seeking needs remain common in higher education, while recent transition studies highlight belonging, identity, and context-sensitive adjustment as key transition issues.^{[1][6]}

Existing research confirms that first-year adjustment is multidimensional. Chinese studies show that orientation programs can improve both academic and social adjustment, and longitudinal evidence suggests that meaning in life positively predicts later

university adjustment.^{[2][3]} International research further emphasizes that early motivation, contextual support, mental health, and sense of belonging shape initial adaptation.^{[4][5][7][8][10]}

However, many studies still examine academic, psychological, or interpersonal factors in isolation. Fewer studies explain how risks in learning, daily life, and social interaction accumulate and reinforce one another during the first semester.

To address this gap, this study draws on 600 valid questionnaires from six universities and one typical case. It maps the distribution of major adjustment risks, explains their underlying mechanism, and proposes practical support strategies for freshman education and student affairs.

Figure 1 shows that the most concentrated risks lie in academic rhythm mismatch, climate and diet maladjustment, weak class integration, and low willingness to seek help. These results suggest that early screening should focus on overlapping, rather than isolated, symptoms.

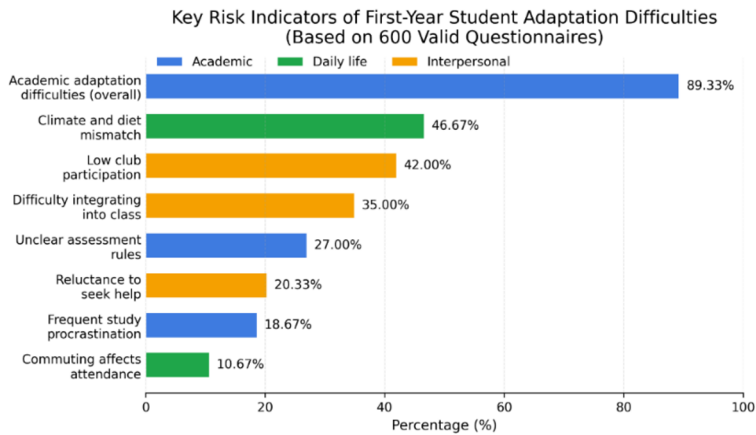


Fig. 1. Distribution of key adjustment risk indicators among first-year students.

2 Manifestations of First-Year Adjustment Difficulties

The survey and case evidence indicate that first-year maladjustment is not a single problem. Instead, academic strain, disorder in daily routines, and hidden social isolation interact with one another and may gradually turn mild discomfort into broader maladjustment.

2.1 Academic Adaptation: Rhythm Mismatch and Procrastination as Dominant Risks

Academic adjustment is the most concentrated challenge. The survey shows that 56.00% of students sometimes could not keep pace with lectures and 33.33% clearly

reported difficulty understanding course content. After entering a more autonomous learning environment, 73.00% sometimes postponed self-study tasks and 18.67% frequently failed to complete them. In addition, 27.00% were unclear about assessment rules, which intensified anxiety, especially in majors with dense and abstract course content. This pattern is consistent with recent evidence that learning adaptation and academic self-efficacy mediate the relationship between freshmen's mental health and academic achievement.^[8]

2.2 Daily-life Adaptation: Climate, Self-care, and Commuting Remain Salient

Daily-life adaptation directly affects emotional stability and learning efficiency. A total of 46.67% of students reported difficulties caused by differences in climate and diet. Another 36.67% lacked sufficient self-care skills, 23.00% said irregular schedules affected class attendance, and 17.00% experienced overspending. Commuting was a smaller but still significant problem, with 10.67% reporting that unfamiliar routes or long travel distances reduced their motivation to attend class.

2.3 Interpersonal Adjustment: Hidden Isolation and Weak Help-seeking

Interpersonal difficulties are less visible but highly persistent. Although 80.00% described their dormitory relationships as generally harmonious, 16.67% said the interaction remained superficial. In the broader campus context, 35.00% found it difficult to integrate into the class community, 42.00% reported low participation in clubs, and 20.33% were unwilling to ask peers for help when problems arose. Weak belonging therefore becomes a hidden amplifier of academic and emotional stress, echoing recent findings on the relationship between belonging and wellbeing among newly enrolled university students.^[10]

Overall, first-year maladjustment is a cross-domain chain in which weak routines, low belonging, and low help-seeking reinforce one another. Effective intervention therefore needs to target combinations of risks rather than separate symptoms.

3 Causes of First-Year Adjustment Difficulties

The evidence suggests that adjustment difficulties are jointly produced by rapid environmental change, insufficient psychological regulation, and fragmented support. These forces interact and jointly shape the first-semester risk pattern identified in this study.

3.1 Environmental Change: Simultaneous Shifts in Learning, Living, and Interaction

The move from high school to university changes several environments at once. Students face a faster and less supervised academic system, independent management of food, sleep, finance, and mobility, and a more diverse social context that requires active

relationship building. When students are not prepared for these changes, local problems easily spread across domains.

3.2 Psychological Regulation: Delayed Cognitive Reframing and Weak Self-management

Many students enter university with idealized or polarized expectations. Some underestimate the demands of autonomous learning, whereas others interpret temporary setbacks as evidence of personal failure. When this cognitive bias is combined with weak emotion regulation, poor time management, and avoidance of challenge, procrastination, anxiety, and withdrawal become more likely. Recent evidence also shows that social support and mental resilience are closely related to whether adjustment risk remains low or worsens over time.^[7]

3.3 Support Fragmentation: School and Family Responses Often Fail to Connect

Support systems do not always work as an integrated network. Universities may provide general orientation but insufficient early warning and targeted follow-up, while some families remain overprotective or communicate mainly through performance pressure. Without coordinated support, students with overlapping risks are more likely to remain unnoticed until the problem worsens.^{[2][6][7]}

Environmental shock, psychological imbalance, and support gaps do not act independently. They transmit and amplify risk through academic, daily-life, and interpersonal pathways, producing cumulative adjustment pressure.

4 Relief Strategies for First-Year Adjustment Difficulties

A practical response should be school-led, family-coordinated, and student-centered. The key is to organize interventions along the time line of pre-arrival preparation, early-semester screening, mid-semester follow-up, and end-of-semester evaluation. Figure 2 visualizes this coordinated framework, and Table 1 summarizes the main tasks and indicators.

4.1 School-level Strategies: Build a Precise and Staged Support System

Universities should treat freshman support as a process rather than a one-off orientation event. The process should integrate risk identification, resource delivery, follow-up, and evaluation around the same student.

Before enrollment and during the first two weeks, universities can provide digital orientation packages, discipline-specific micro-courses, dormitory guides, campus route videos, and peer sharing activities. These measures reduce uncertainty and lower the cognitive burden created by an unfamiliar environment.

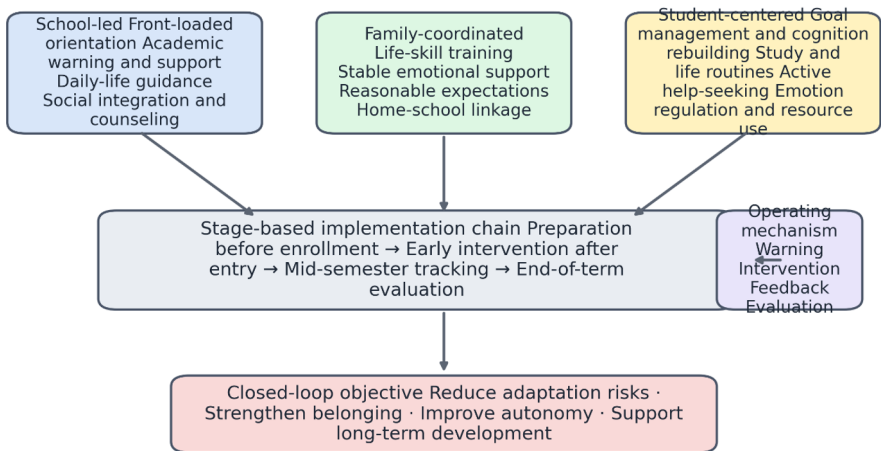


Fig. 2. Coordinated framework for staged first-year adjustment support.

During the first month, a coordinated system involving course instructors, counselors, academic mentors, and peer mentors should screen for continuous absence, missing assignments, low class participation, and severe confusion about assessment rules. Students with weak foundations then need bridging support, small-group tutoring, and clearer feedback on course expectations.

Daily-life support should also be developmental. Climate and diet guidance, dormitory visits, commuting maps, and life-skills training can reduce disruptions in sleep, budgeting, and basic self-care before these problems spill over into academic disengagement.

Finally, universities should connect social support with mental-health services. Low-threshold class activities, dormitory agreements, interest-based groups, psychological screening, and timely counseling referral can increase belonging and make help-seeking safer and earlier.^{[5][8][9][10]}

4.2 Family-level Strategies: Shift from Substitution to Developmental Support

Family support matters not because parents solve problems for students, but because they provide stable emotional backing, realistic expectations, and timely coordination with the university.

Before enrollment, families should gradually hand over responsibility for document management, budgeting, route planning, and daily routines. This reduces the gap between academic readiness and life readiness.

After enrollment, communication should focus more on emotional state than on grades alone. Parents should pay attention to warning signs such as chronic insomnia, continuous absence, persistent low mood, or abnormal spending, while avoiding frequent commands or horizontal comparison with other students. This is especially important because students' belonging and wellbeing are shaped by both academic and social conditions during the earliest phase of transition.^[10]

When problems persist, families should enter a home-school coordination process with counselors or advisers so that information, judgment, and support intensity remain aligned.

Table 1. Main implementation tasks and evaluation indicators of the coordinated relief framework.

Actor	Key tasks	Time window	Indicators
University	Pre-arrival orientation; early warning; living and commuting support; peer and counseling services	Admission to end of first semester	Absence rate; flagged cases; counseling use; class participation
Family	Life-skill training; stable emotional contact; realistic expectations; home-school coordination	Pre-enrollment to month 3	Timeliness of risk feedback; communication quality; student autonomy
Student	Goal setting; routine building; help-seeking; emotion regulation; resource use	Whole adaptation period	Homework completion; sleep regularity; activity participation; self-rated adjustment

4.3 Student-level Strategies: Rebuild Cognition, Routines, and Resource Use

Students are the direct actors in the adjustment process. Effective adaptation requires not only external support but also active cognitive reframing, habit formation, and resource use.

At the cognitive level, students need to shift from an exam-centered logic to a developmental logic of continuous planning and feedback. Semester goals, weekly plans, and visible task lists can turn vague anxiety into manageable action.

At the behavioral level, students should strengthen three basic abilities: time management, self-monitoring, and daily-life self-care. Fixed preview periods, study logs, stable sleep schedules, spending control, and active use of libraries, office hours, and study groups can reduce the probability of cumulative failure.

At the social and emotional level, students should treat help-seeking as a mature strategy rather than a sign of weakness. Low-pressure participation in group activities, emotion tracking, exercise, and timely contact with counselors or mental-health services are crucial when distress lasts for more than two weeks.

In short, strategy effectiveness depends on whether schools, families, and students can form a synchronized support network around the same student rather than acting in parallel but unconnected ways.

4.4 Coordinated Operation: Create a Closed Loop of Monitoring and Improvement

To make the strategy sustainable, universities should establish a closed loop of data monitoring, risk identification, classified intervention, and feedback. Attendance, assignment completion, dormitory feedback, psychological screening, and activity participation can be integrated into one observation framework while protecting student privacy.

At the implementation level, colleges, counselors, and classes should review adaptation risks regularly, while families provide contextual information and students report their lived experience. High-risk students may require individualized plans, whereas recurrent common problems should trigger timely adjustment of support resources and activity design.

5 Conclusion

Based on 600 valid questionnaires and one typical case, this study shows that academic rhythm mismatch is the most concentrated first-year risk, while daily-life maladjustment and hidden social isolation remain common and often overlap.

The study further argues that adjustment difficulties are generated through the interaction of environmental change, delayed psychological regulation, and fragmented support. A coordinated framework linking orientation, early warning, daily-life support, and timely help-seeking can therefore reduce first-semester risk and strengthen belonging and persistence.

This study still has limitations. The questionnaire data are cross-sectional self-reports, the sample can be expanded across regions and disciplines, and the case analysis improves explanation but not causal identification.

Future research should use longitudinal tracking, interviews, and intervention evaluation to test which support strategies most effectively improve first-year adjustment in diverse institutional settings.

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