

# Resilience and the Student Experience: Building Grit and Perseverance in Our Students

Peter Forkner, Ph.D. Director, Counseling Center  
Bentley University

Keith Anderson, Ph.D. Psychologist  
Rensselaer Polytechnic Inst. Counseling Center

# Agenda

1. Defining resilience
  - ✓ Influence of resilience in various domains
  - ✓ Positive psychology
2. Collaborative initiatives for increasing resiliency
3. Resiliency programs on college campuses
4. Recent research on resiliency training
  - ✓ Calif. Lutheran Path project
  - ✓ 4 year Duke/Davidson/Furman/Johnson Smith
5. Measuring resilience
  - ✓ A complex construct
6. Pilot study of a resilience training project

# Rationale

- Anecdotal evidence that students are coming to campus less resilient than previous generations
  - More parent involvement in the daily student experience
  - Students seem less able to tolerate difficult situations

# Rationale

- Continuing search for suicide prevention strategies.
  - Predictors of a suicide attempt
    - Hopelessness
    - Prior attempt
    - Substance abuse

# Rationale

- Continuing search for suicide prevention strategies.
  - Predictors of a suicide attempt
    - Hopelessness
    - Prior attempt
    - Substance abuse
    - **Stressful events**

# Rationale

## Suicide Prevention

- Suicide attempts are often preceded by a series of stressful events
  - Identifying the means to reduce the frequency of stressful events via resilience training could reduce the number of suicide attempts.

# Rationale

- Comments from the field
  - Distress tolerance seems to be decreasing

# Comments from the field:

## A Counseling center perspective

- Two students sought counseling because they had seen a mouse in their off-campus apartment.
- Faculty have noted that students' emotional fragility has become a serious problem when it comes to grading, concerns over suicidality if grades are poor.

# Comments from the field

- Emergency calls to Counseling had more than doubled over the past five years
- Students are increasingly seeking help for, and apparently having emotional crises over problems of everyday life

“I have done a considerable amount of reading and research in recent months on the topic of resilience in college students. Our students are no different from what is being reported across the country on the state of late adolescence/early adulthood. There has been an increase in diagnosable mental health problems, but there has also been a decrease in the ability of many young people to manage the everyday bumps in the road of life. Whether we want it or not, these students are bringing their struggles to their teachers and others on campus who deal with students on a day-to-day basis. The lack of resilience is interfering with the academic mission of the University and is thwarting the emotional and personal development of students.”

# Defining resilience

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;  
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;

If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster  
And treat those two impostors just the same

And watch the things you gave your life to, broken,  
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings  
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,  
And lose, and start again at your beginnings  
(excerpts from 'If' by Kipling)

# Defining Resiliency

- **Resiliency:** quality in objects to hold or recover their shape, or in people to stay intact. This is a kind of strength. If you bend a fork and it bends right back — that's **resiliency**.

# Defining Resiliency

- **Resiliency:** quality in objects to hold or recover their shape, or in people to stay intact. This is a kind of strength. If you bend a fork and it bends right back — that's **resiliency**.



# Other definitions

- Developed coping techniques that allow people to effectively and relatively easily navigate around or through crises
- Built on strengths of optimism and positive emotion.
- An individual's ability to properly adapt to stress, stressful situations and adversity
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXYmxMGVFxE>

# Occupational Stress and Resilience

The workplace can be a source of various external stressors that affect health and wellbeing.

- Uncontrolled pace of work (assembly line)
- Uncontrolled noise (factory)
- Dangerous work conditions (mining)
- Responsible for the safety of others (air traffic)

# Occupational Resilience

- In high stress work environments resilience is evidenced by:
  - ❖ The ability to use emotion focused coping or problem focused coping as dictated by the situation
  - ❖ Tolerance for situations where little control is possible
  - ❖ Effective use of self-soothing strategies

# High levels of occupational stress can result in:

- cardiovascular mortality
- coronary heart disease
- heart attack
- ischemic heart disease
- obesity
- type 2 diabetes
- depression
- anxiety
- sleep problems
- problem drinking

# Resilience and Positive Psychology

- Positive Psychology – focus is on personal growth
- Resilience training is rooted in Positive Psychology
  - Identifying strategies for increasing positive emotions
  - Promote realistic ways of fostering well being
  - Identify beliefs that limit the ability to flourish
  - Focus on strengths that encourage growth

# Traditional Stress Management

- Often focuses on the learning of skills
  - Relaxation training
  - Biofeedback
  - Meditation
  - Mindfulness
- However, these programs do not address the internal causes of stress.

Resilience training involves identifying internal factors that influence stress levels and teaching skills for building strengths.

# Resilience in Higher Education

- The Grit Survey: being used to assess persistence and perseverance as it relates to retention and admissions
- Calls for research on resilience as it relates to academic persistence
- Expanding on the “marshmallow experiment”
- Internal locus of control and academic achievement

# Resiliency Training in Higher Education

- How can we teach resilience? Is it possible?
- Generally have focused on four areas
  - Relaxation training
  - Cognitive-behavioral strategies
  - Social support
  - Psychoeducation

# Collaborative Initiatives for Increasing Resiliency in Higher Education

- Multifaceted higher education programs examining resiliency
  - The Student Resiliency Project – Carolina Schools
  - The Resiliency Consortium – Ivy League Schools

# Collaborative Initiatives for Increasing Resiliency in Higher Education

- The Student Resiliency Project
  - \$3.4 million grant from Duke Endowment for four year study of resilience and resilience building interventions
    - Duke, Davidson, Johnson C. Smith and Furman
  - “if you only think through the lens of treatment – if you don't complement treatment with the promotion of resilience and well-being – you're part of the problem, not the solution.” – Corey Keyes, Emory University Sociologist

# Collaborative Initiatives for Increasing Resiliency in Higher Education

- The Student Resiliency Project (cont.)
  - All students fill out 400 question survey on background, health, and goals
  - Will identify stressors in college life and the characteristics associated with positive adjustments to college life
    - self-efficacy, optimism and self-compassion.
  - Results will serve as the basis for the development of specific interventions to increase resilience

# Collaborative Initiatives for Increasing Resiliency in Higher Education

- The Resilience Consortium
  - Formed in 2014 by 10 Ivy League Schools
    - Brown, Harvard, Columbia, Princeton, Cornell, Stanford, Dartmouth, University of Chicago, University of Pennsylvania, Duke
  - An association of higher education faculty, learning services, and counseling services interested in understanding and promoting student resilience.
  - Working collaboratively to understand and promote resiliency on college campuses

# Resiliency Programs on College Campuses

- Resiliency programs looking to increase thriving through normalizing failure
  - The Princeton Perspective Project
  - The Resiliency Project at Stanford University
  - The Success-Failure Project at Harvard University
  - The [IM]Perfection Project at Vanderbilt University
  - The Resilience Cooperative at Tulane University

# Resiliency Programs on College Campuses

- The Resiliency Project at Stanford University
  - An effort to encourage risk taking – too many students were afraid of failure
  - In 2009, surveyed students about which staff, faculty, alumni they most admired
  - Those people offered interviews about the ways in which they had experienced failure
  - “Stanford, I Screwed Up”

# Resiliency Programs on College Campuses

- The Success-Failure Project at Harvard University
  - Seek to have students be less avoidant and embrace failure
    - Beyond the Success: interviews with alumni who years later have reflected on the definition of success and failure
    - Reflections on Rejections: Discussion of faculty, staff and alumni failures

# Research on Resiliency Training in Higher Education

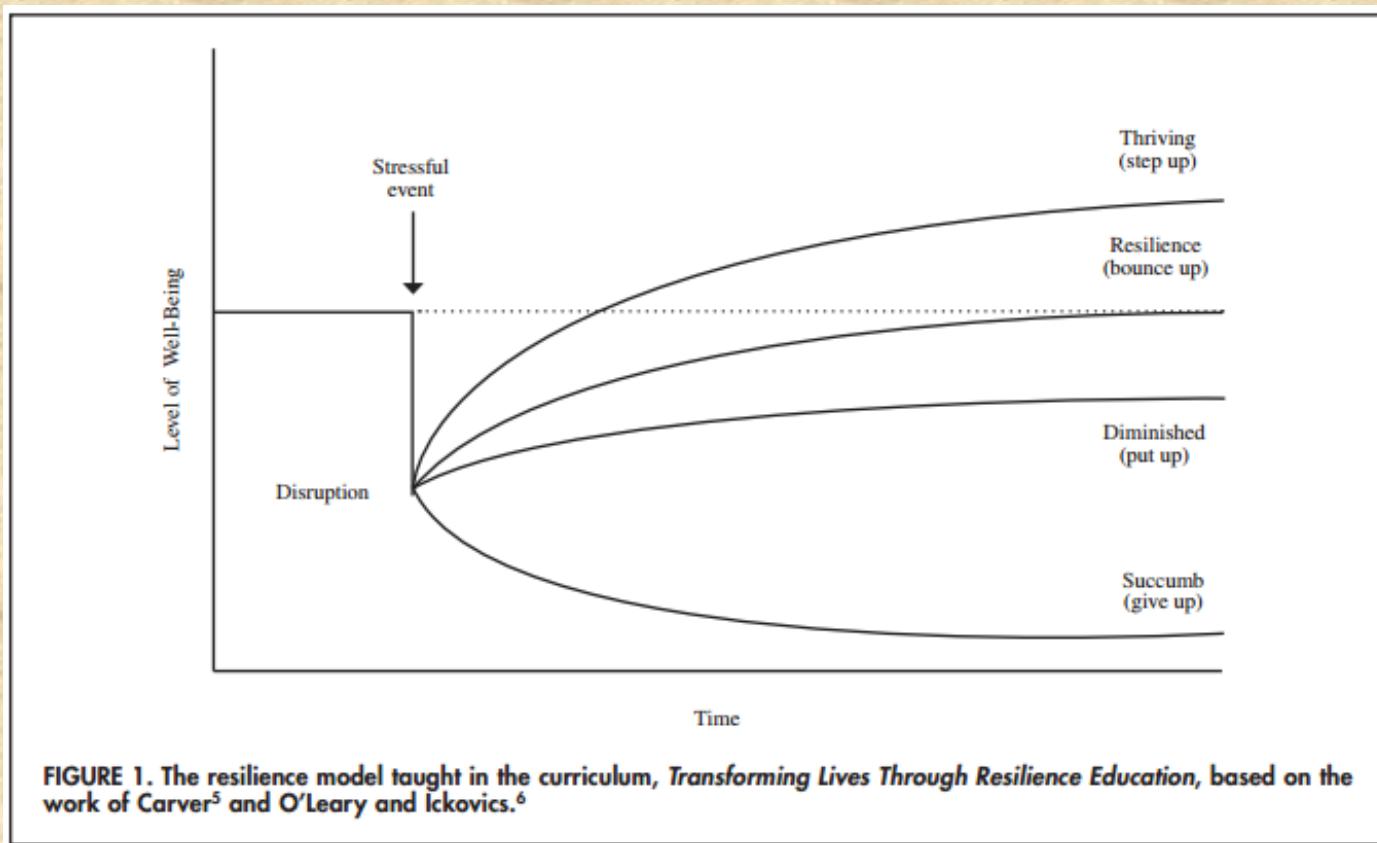
Educational programs and workshops delivered to students

- Transforming Lives Through Resilience Education - University of Texas at Austin
- Program for Accelerated Thriving and Growth (PATH) - California Lutheran University

# Research on Resiliency Training in Higher Education

- Transforming Lives Through Resilience Education
  - University of Texas at Austin
  - Pilot study of resiliency training program
  - Four modules
    - Transforming Stress Into Resilience
    - Taking Responsibility
    - Focusing on Empowering Interpretations
    - Creating Meaningful Connections

# Research on Resiliency Training in Higher Education



Steinhardt M, Dolbier C. Evaluation of a resilience intervention to enhance coping strategies and protective factors and decrease symptomatology. *J Am Coll Health*. 2008;56:445–453.

# Research on Resiliency Training in Higher Education

- Transforming Lives Through Resilience Education (cont.)
  - Students who went through the training demonstrated:
    - Greater resilience and more effective coping strategies
    - Higher protective factors such as self-esteem, self-leadership, and positive affect
    - lower scores on symptomatology, including depressive symptoms, negative affect, and perceived stress

# Research on Resiliency Training in Higher Education

- Program for Accelerated Thriving and Growth (PATH)
  - California Lutheran University
  - Active problem solving approach is essential for resilience
  - Focuses on teaching optimism and a personal control explanatory style

# Research on Resiliency Training in Higher Education

- Results showed that:
  - PATH was successful at teaching more adaptive explanatory styles
  - Had significant impact on depressive symptoms
  - Having a personal control explanatory style was predictive of resilience and thriving
  - Had a positive impact on resilience even compared to placebo

# Research on Resiliency Training in Higher Education

- Take home on research on resiliency training in higher education
  - Concepts such as problem focused coping and taking responsibility impact resilience
  - These are concepts that can be taught relatively quickly and inexpensively

# Measuring Resiliency

- A difficult construct to measure
  - Different definitions
  - Hard to evaluate across populations
- Between 25% and 84% of the population are resilient
- No “gold standard” when it comes to measuring resiliency

# Instruments that Measure Resiliency

- Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC)
  - Resilience as a measure of successful stress coping ability
  - Biopsychospiritual balance (“homeostasis”) and reintegration following disruption
  - Used in both the Transforming Lives Through Resilience Education and the PATH studies

# Instruments that Measure Resiliency

**TABLE 1: Characteristics of resilient people**

Reference	Characteristic
Kobasa, 1979	View change or stress as a challenge/opportunity
Kobasa, 1979	Commitment
Kobasa, 1979	Recognition of limits to control
Rutter, 1985	Engaging the support of others
Rutter, 1985	Close, secure attachment to others
Rutter, 1985	Personal or collective goals
Rutter, 1985	Self-efficacy
Rutter, 1985	Strengthening effect of stress
Rutter, 1985	Past successes
Rutter, 1985	Realistic sense of control/having choices
Rutter, 1985	Sense of humor
Rutter, 1985	Action oriented approach
Lyons, 1991	Patience
Lyons, 1991	Tolerance of negative affect
Rutter, 1985	Adaptability to change
Current	Optimism
Current	Faith

Connor, K. M., & Davidson, J. R. T. (2003). Development of a new resilience scale: The Connor-Davidson resilience scale (CD-RISC). *Depression and Anxiety*, 18, 76–82.

# Instruments that Measure Resiliency

- Personal Views Survey (PVS-III-R)
  - Measures Hardiness
    - commitment
    - challenge
    - control
  - Hardiness based on study of managers during deregulation of telephone industry
  - Hardiness shown to “buffer” against mental health problems and can enhance performance under stress

## Pilot program in resiliency training at RPI

First year of a program for students having academic difficulty.

- 3 one-hour lectures

- Pretest/Post-test, no control group

- 25 Participants were not volunteers

- Difficult to assess level of participation

Personal Views Survey III – 18 items

Lecture content focused on:

- ✓ skill building
- ✓ awareness of factors that limit resilience
- ✓ activities that build resilience

Post test scores on resiliency improved significantly  
( $p=.008$ )

# Resilience and Academic Success

College can be a stressful experience for many young people. Hardiness is a characteristic that is important for academic success.

Q     Can you benefit from improving your resilience-related cognitive and behavioral skills?

**To become more resilient, you must decide that you find personal value in this change, it must be important to you.**

**You must be willing to take action to develop resilience, it is not something that will develop passively.**

Is it the mountain we conquer, or  
ourselves we conquer?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXYmxMGVFsE>

# Resilience is...

- ❖ Not just surviving, but thriving in adversity
- ❖ The ability to persevere through obstacles
- ❖ The confidence in yourself to persist when life is difficult

Synonyms: Grit, mental toughness, hardness

Proverb – Tough seas make good skippers

# Resilience and Academic Success

- Use of a journal
  - Helpful to track important events
  - Use to complete the exercises done for this program
  - Carry with or access every day
- On a daily basis keep a Gratitude Journal for the semester, each day write about 3 good things that happened to you, and journal about these experiences

# Managing stressful situations

- Tolerating stress/distress is a critical aspect of developing resilience
  - Most situations where we learn to be more resilient involve some aspect of coping with stress
  - Effective stress management strategies make it easier for us to tolerate distress

# Your personal responsibility line



Acceptance of personal responsibility  
Ownership of choices and freedom to choose  
Saying... 'I want to....'

**Personal Responsibility**

Saying... "I need to...."

denying, blaming, making excuses, rationalizing,  
intellectualizing

(More time spent above the line = greater self esteem)

## **3 Assignments for session II**

1. Develop a personal set of goals and objectives for your life.... A mission statement.

  - Identify ways in which you can use the statement in times of struggle, adversity and discouragement.
  - Recognize your personal ideals/beliefs about performance, what do you expect from yourself.
  - Identify important personal goals and values
2. Exhaustively list joyful activities and events and use the list to deduce passions and construct a preliminary statement of how you would like to live your life.

# Assignments for session II

3. Opened door exercise: write about three times in your life when an important door closed on you and consider what doors opened after they closed

# Session II

## Assessing your resilience

Resilience is a measurable quality

In Your Time at Rensselaer

- Describe some situations where you demonstrated resilience?
- Describe some situations where you needed resilience?

# Assessing Resilience

- ❖ When faced with failure, are you likely to persist or avoid the situation?
- ❖ When you have the opportunity to try something new, are you more likely to choose something where you are more likely to be successful?
- ❖ How well do you adapt to change?

# Resiliency Factors

- Persistence
- Motivation
- Goal Orientation
- Optimism
- Confidence
- Cognitive reframing
- Emotional regulation
- Decisive risk-taking
- Internal locus of control
- Insight
- Self-efficacy
- Altruism
- Connection to others
- Utilization of relationships
- Well balanced lifestyle

# Developing Resilience

- A. Identify thoughts that prevent resilience
- B. Identify thoughts that encourage resilience
- C. Use effecting stress coping strategies
- D. Practice persistence
- E. Explore self-explanatory style
- F. Acceptance
- G. Letting go
- H. Social support.
- I. Tolerating distress

## C. Use effecting stress coping strategies

### Problem focused coping

- ❖ active coping
- ❖ planning
- ❖ positive reframing
- ❖ acceptance

□ Help students solve stressful situations inside their circle of influence, usually a more productive strategy

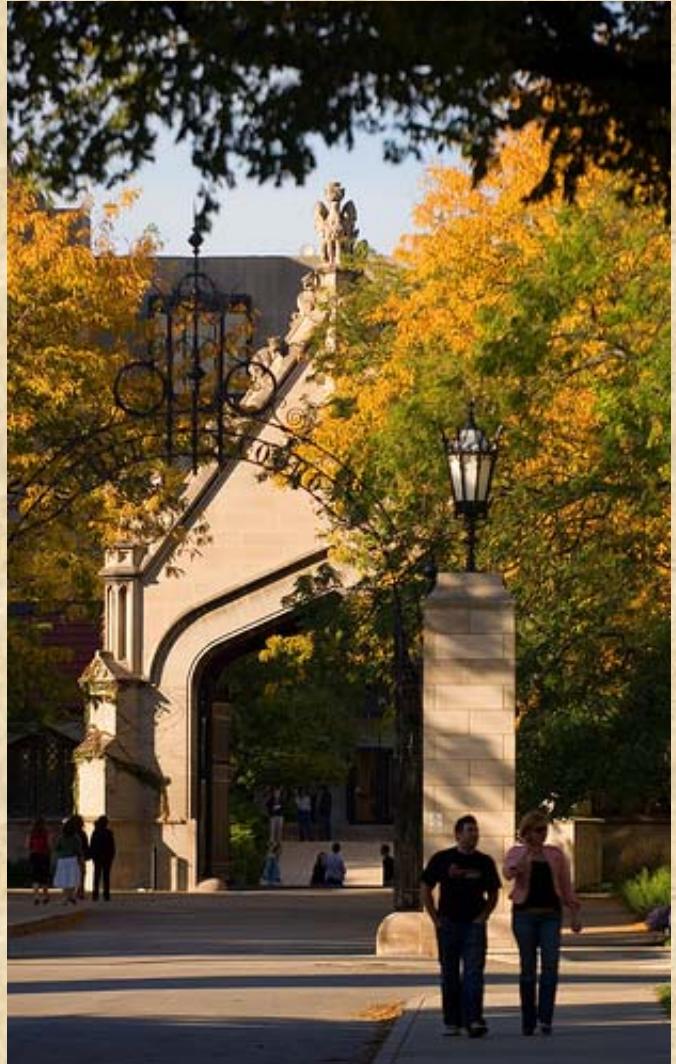
### Emotional focused coping

- ❖ Denial
- ❖ Behavioral disengagement,
- ❖ Self-distraction
- ❖ Venting

□ Useful when feeling overwhelmed, or when help not available

## Activity

- Write down a goal, experience, or desire you have been avoiding because of the discomfort or frustration it involves
- List steps to accomplish the goal or move forward
- Name the unpleasant feelings associated with each step
- Describe strategies you can use to help you cope with the pain/frustration



## H. Social Support

- Meaningful relationships are more likely to lead to above-the-line responses and help you think/act in empowering ways.
- Health and well being are directly related to your connections with other people
- Social connection boosts your ability to tolerate distress

Proverb: If you want to travel fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go with others.

What strategies can you use to increase social support?

# I. Tolerating Distress

Develop strategies for improving your ability to tolerate distress

- Recognize that feeling distressed is a natural experience
- Remember that being upset is not a long term condition and you will feel better
- Develop some self-soothing strategies that work for you
  - Remember, these are strategies for use when in distress .....
  - Not to avoid distress or procrastinate

# Self Soothing

Meditation

Mindfulness

Listen to music

Exercise

Talk with friends

Distract your self – guide your attention to something else

Change of scenery

Relaxation training

Helping others

Find meaning in the situation

- Opened door exercise: write about three times in your life when an important door closed on you and consider what doors opened after they closed
- Random act of kindness: carry out one act of kindness a day for 5 consecutive days, write a reflection about your experience in your journal.
- Forgiveness letter: write a letter to someone who has wronged you and pledge to forgive them if appropriate, but do not send the letter or discuss the letter with them.
- Three good things journal: keep a Gratitude Journal for the semester, each day write about 3 good things that happened to you, and journal about these experiences.

- Change a habit paper: decide on a habit that you want to improve or change. Write 6-8 pages about the habit, your reasons for wanting to change, and the action plan you will use to create change. Focus on strengths you can leverage.

# References

- A methodological review of resilience measurement scales  
Gill Windle, Kate M Bennett, Jane Noyes  
Health and Quality of Life Outcomes 2011, 9:8
- [http://www.hqlo.com/\\_content/9/1/8](http://www.hqlo.com/_content/9/1/8)
- Steinhardt M. & Dolbier C. (2008). Evaluation of a resilience intervention to enhance coping strategies and protective factors and decrease symptomatology. *Journal of American College Health*, 56, 445–453.
- Gerson, M. W. & Nathaniel, F. (2013). PATH: a program to build resilience and thriving in undergraduates. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 43, pp. 2169–2184.