Resiliency Among College Students

Special Topics in Higher Education

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EDH 5931
In a period of rapid change and new challenges in Higher Education, many college campuses are facing far larger populations of students with mental illness and increased incidents of violence on campus. As these challenges continue to present themselves, student affairs practitioners will need to develop a better understanding of resilience and ways to help foster it within individual students (Magolda et al., 2011). Not only would such an understanding reduce the impact of campus and personal crisis on individual students, but it would also improve the overall collegiate experience of nearly all students and provide students with a quality that would assist them throughout their lives.

Resilience is defined as “the ability to recover quickly from disruptions in functioning that result from stress appraisals and to return to the previous level of functioning” (Steinhardt and Dolbier, 2008). While discussions of resiliency in college students is a more recent discussion at colleges and universities, researchers from many disciplines have long been studying resiliency in many populations for decades. Throughout many of these studies, it has been suggested that individuals with high resilience display optimism and a curiosity for new life experiences as well as overall high levels of positive emotionality (Tugade and Frederickson, 2004). The connection between positive emotionality and resilience is explained by Frederickson (2001) hypothesis that individuals who are experiencing a negative emotion have a smaller repertoire of reactions such as hiding in association with fear or fighting in association with anger compared to individuals who are experiencing positive emotions who have a broadened repertoire of thoughts and behaviors in reaction to a stressor.
College life is often synonymous with stress levels, which have been shown to have negative physical consequences with possibilities including somatic symptoms (Lumley & Provenzano, 2003). While the stress causing issues severe enough to develop into physical symptoms may come from sources external to campus such as family or financial issues, it has been demonstrated that resiliency may contribute to illness-resistance (Yi, Smith, & Vitaliano, 2005). Additionally, some studies have suggested a direct link between hardiness (a characteristic similar to aspects of resilience) and coping skills with symptoms of illness independent of stress (Soderstrom et al., 2000). These results suggest that by increasing resiliency on campus, student affairs professionals may be able to raise the overall health on campus.

Steinhardt and Dolbier (2008) suggest that there are effective strategies which can help students increase resiliency and develop effective coping strategies. Their pilot study provided 30 students weekly 2-hour sessions for 4 weeks. Weekly meetings aimed to increase student knowledge of causes and coping strategy of stress as well as helping student practice adaptive coping strategies in place of maladaptive behaviors thinking (e.g. perfectionistic, self-punishing, all-or-nothing) or behaviors (e.g. drug and alcohol use). The pilot study utilized a developed curriculum titled “Transforming Lives through Resilience Education” which is currently offered for purchase as four online modules through the University of Texas at Austin College of Education under the supervision of Dr. Steinhardt. Perhaps the most encouraging piece of this curriculum is the goal of assisting students to return to a higher level of functioning after a stress event (thriving) rather than simply returning to the pre-event level (resilience). The participants in this study demonstrated more effective coping strategies including self-
leadership, self-esteem, and positive affect than their control group counterparts and also displayed fewer symptoms of stress.

Our research about resiliency led to discussions with Dr. Nikki Pritchett, the Director of the University Counseling Center at Florida State University. When asked for her opinion of best practices, Dr. Pritchett suggested work by Martin Seligman in Positive Psychology and Strength-Building interventions. Ernst et al. (2009) discusses the widespread commonality of depression and anxiety amongst young adults. Furthermore, they argue that well being should be something taught in the school setting, stating “because most young people attend school, schools provide the opportunity to reach them and enhance their well-being on a wide scale (Ernst et al., 2009, p. 235). It can be argued that this mainly would apply to primary through secondary education, as not all young adults attend college. However, Ernst et al. depict this thought to indicate the influence the education system has on a student’s well being, and perhaps, the success of their life based on the level of happiness. The article uses the Penn Resiliency Program (PRP), one of the most widely research programs designed to prevent depression in young adults, to study its effectiveness. The study found that the PRP reduces and prevents symptoms of depression, reduces hopelessness, prevents clinical levels of depression and anxiety as well as reduces and prevents anxiety and behavioral problems (Ernst et al., 2009). Overall, the study found the Penn Resiliency Program produces positive improvements in students’ well being. Thus, this program and other forms of positive education, as Seligman refers to it, can be very valuable in the educational setting to increase resiliency among students.
Programs such as the Penn Resiliency Program are becoming more widespread and continue to be adapted, used and reformed to help increase resiliency on college campuses. Programs including the previously mentioned “Transforming Lives through Resilience Education” at the University of Texas at Austin, as well as various methods from the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania are noted as impactful programs that could be implemented at other universities. Considering the ongoing financial barriers higher education institutions continue to face, it may be difficult for universities or counseling centers to adapt a program such as this with ease. However, there are tactics and practices used and suggested throughout these programs that student affairs professionals can work to implement despite some potential challenges including lack of staff and financial support. These practices, most of which can be found on the American Psychological Association’s “Road to Resilience” page are valuable tools for individuals working with students in order to help them become more resilient. Ernst et al. (2009) suggests identifying and utilizing strengths in a new creative way, having individuals list good things that happened that day/week and reflect on the reason behind it. The authors also suggest offering support to help increase the student’s engagement in learning, involvement/enjoyment of school and their achievement. Increased levels of these aspects help to improve the level of resiliency and possibly increase the student’s level of happiness. In addition to those listed based on the PRP, the APA (American Psychological Association), suggest helping the individual to make connections, to be accepting of change, to move toward goals, make decisive actions, take advantage of opportunities and to keep things in perspective (The Road to Resilience, 2013). Much of this ties in to self-care, which is also included by the APA.
Nikki Pritchett also mentioned that parents have one of the biggest influences on the student, especially in this generation. Parental involvement could play a big part in the large number of students who are unable to developing coping strategies on their own. Linda Bips (2010) stated, “many of today’s students lack resilience and at the first sign of difficulty are unable to summon strategies to cope.” Bips also argues that too many adolescents are being treated medically for anxiety and depression and faculty members are being forced to teach students about independence before they can move on to the subject matter of the academic coursework. Thus, it is important that higher education institutions are placing an emphasis on student well being and resiliency, so they are able to help students succeed not only academically, but personally, professionally and socially—and will continue to do so post-graduation.

Working to improve resiliency at higher education institutions is a valuable skill and one that is necessary especially when dealing with students from the Millennial generation. According to Ballinger (2010), a survey conducted at the University of Pittsburgh showed that “students were more interested in learning how to manage stress than in any other health program” (p. 281). However, the implementation of programs and use of best practices at higher education institutions are not yet a common occurrence. Institutions who are working on improving resiliency through prevention programs, trainings, or education are at the forefront of this issue and will likely be used as a model in the future. Considering the increase in mental health issues that counseling centers across the nation are having to help students face, it is valuable to note that the resources may have to come from elsewhere in order to successfully improve student resiliency. As found through research previously discussed,
resiliency and its techniques can be taught. It is possibly that the education of these skills can fall to a department other than the university’s counseling center in order to best serve the students and their needs. Overall, the education of resiliency is something that colleges and universities should be considering improving upon or implementing. As an institution of higher education, the academic setting allows for students to gain the knowledge and skills in order to become more resilient. Through the various techniques discussed throughout this summary, higher education professionals can provide the resources and support that students need to effectively develop coping strategies and thus prepare them for success as well as a happy life.
References


