

RESILIENCE

“The gem cannot be polished without friction, or man perfected without trials.” – *Chinese proverb*

“Success and failure. We think of them as opposites, but they’re not. They’re companions – the hero and the sidekick.” – *Lawrence Shames*

“When it is dark enough, you can see the stars.”
– *Emerson*

“There are no failures, only lessons to be learned.” – *Oprah Winfrey*

Resilience is the ability to handle adverse situations with persistence and hope; wisdom, character, and strength often emerge in the process. Resilience is a natural survival instinct – we all have it. In some people, it shines bright – the ghetto child who doggedly pursues his education, or the immigrant who conquers unspeakable hardships to start a new life in a foreign land. In other people, though, the resilient spark is snuffed out. What makes the difference? Research is beginning to identify characteristics of resilient people and the factors in their lives that have nurtured them. This information has significant implications for educators.

In your classes, you can see the many degrees of resilience in your students’ faces when you return exams with low scores. Some of your students have already learned to deal with failure, and they know how to recover with little assistance from you. Others may be upset and surprised by a poor grade, but they will take the initiative to seek help; these are the students at your office door, asking for your support. The third group may be devastated, paralyzed, embarrassed, ashamed, or in denial. This exam may be their first experience with academic failure, and they have no idea how to deal with it, or it may be one more crisis in an already stressful life. For these students, your initiative and intervention can make all the difference in encouraging their innate flame of resistance. In this edition of *LDC Lately...*, we equip you with an understanding of what resilience looks like and suggest strategies for strengthening the resilience of your students.

You know, I don't know any outright impediments that have been put up. I'm sure they have been, but I believe in working so hard, taking it up to the next level, that I probably overcame them. Who knows? I'm sure I've been discriminated against. I've experienced racism, but not in the sense where I let it get in my way. 'Cause if you do that, they win.

– Damon, 4th year student

Damon exemplifies the type of resiliency we like to see in students. Researchers have been increasingly interested in discovering *how* students like Damon, who has seen his share of adversity, continue to be resilient learners. In this article, I will briefly integrate information from a research project that I am completing regarding resilient college students, with an earlier study of this same population (Goodwin, 2002), and the existing literature on educational resiliency. The identification of the characteristics of resilient students helps to further define resiliency and to provide direction for us as educators.

My research probed the lives of twenty-three extraordinary students who were admitted to college under the auspices of the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP) because they had histories of educational and socioeconomic disadvantage. These students were predominantly from urban schools and with first or second generation immigrant backgrounds. Their families have struggled at the edges of society and, consequently, these students have experienced the full spectrum of adverse conditions. Remarkably, twenty-two of these twenty-three students graduated from a selective university within five years of enrollment.

To generate the following list of characteristics often associated with resilient students, I distilled findings from a host of recent educational resiliency studies (Benard, 1995;¹ Benard & Marshall, 1997;² Benard, 1995;³ Brooks, 1994;⁴ McMillan & Reed, 1994;⁵ Waxman, Gray, & Padron, 2002⁶). Then I overlaid the characteristics confirmed by my student participants (Goodwin, 2002⁷). Together, they create a composite sketch of resilient college students. Please keep in mind that these attributes are *expressions* of resiliency and not causes.

In interpersonal relationships, resilient students:

- elicit support from a variety of individuals, which sets in motion a “...cycle of positive reciprocity that enables these students to reach out to other people and expect help.”^{1,5,6}
- are willing to ask for help and develop more positive attitudes about utilizing resources.^{5,6,7}
- trust and respect others, and feel more connected.^{5,6,7}
- see the world as a positive place despite hardships.^{5,6,7}
- are often born with “easy” temperaments and find it easier to attain positive responses.⁴
- show social competence through empathy, communication skills, and a sense of humor.^{1,2,3,6,7}

In their family situations resilient students:

- have a close bond with one caregiver through whom they develop trust.^{2,5,6,7}
- have positive role models who are often substitute caregivers.^{5,6,7}
- have parents who have high expectations.^{5,6}
- find the family a “protective factor,” despite its composition.^{5,6}
- receive from the family informal counseling, support, and help with achieving success.^{2,4,5,6}
- have families who believe that life makes sense and that they have some control over it.^{5,6,7}
- receive warmth and affection from family members.⁴
- have caregivers who set clear and reasonable structure and limits.⁴
- have parents with high school educations.^{5,6,7}
- have responsibilities within their families of “required helpfulness” that lend purpose to life and promote the belief that they can help others (caring for family members, chores, etc.).^{2,5,6,7}

In their **educational environment**, resilient students:

- come to class and are prepared. ^{5,6,7}
- volunteer for in-class and out-of-class activities. ^{5,6,7}
- know how to crack the academic code (play the academic “game”). ^{5,6,7}
- have high, intrinsic, achievement motivation. ^{1,3,5,6,7}
- have an internal locus of control that leads to higher academic achievement. ^{1,5,6,7}
- have aspirations for higher educational achievement (graduate school, professional degrees). ^{1,5,6,7}
- derive satisfaction from success in self-fulfilling activities
- are self starters with a strong desire for success. ^{5,6,7}
- hold themselves personally responsible for their performance; assume ownership of outcomes. ^{5,6,7}
- attribute poor performance to internal factors (lack of effort/not trying/not studying enough). ^{4,5,6,7}
- view mistakes as experiences from which to learn. ^{4,7}
- have a sense of self-efficacy – see themselves as successful. ^{1,4,5,7}
- like or put up with school; view it as more than academics. ^{5,6,7}
- are involved with extracurriculars as an informal source of support that connects them with a network of people. ^{5,6,7}
- find opportunities within school to enhance self esteem and competence. ^{2,3,4,6,7}
- make connections with at least one charismatic adult, often a “turnaround teacher.” ^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7}

In **everyday life situations**, resilient students:

- utilize problem-solving skills such as the ability to plan, to be resourceful in seeking help, and to think creatively, critically, & reflectively. ^{1,2,6,7}
- have a critical consciousness, an awareness of structures of oppression. ^{1,6,7}
- create strategies for overcoming oppression. ^{1,6,7}
- demonstrate autonomy, a sense of their own identity. ^{1,2,3,6,7}
- act independently. ^{1,6,7}
- exert control over their environment and believe odds can be surmounted. ^{1,3,4,6,7}
- have a spiritual connectedness. ^{1,2}
- possess a strong sense of self-esteem⁴
- strive to create a balanced system of priorities in their lives.⁷

In looking to the **future**, resilient students:

- have clear, realistic goals that give them a mature sense of purpose. ^{1,5,6}
- believe in a bright future-- optimistically hopeful and confident. ^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7}
- are persistent. ^{1,6,7}
- use difficult experiences as reality checks that motivate them toward goals. ^{5,6,7}

The students in my research responded well to educators who acknowledge that learning is risky business and who aren't afraid to take risks themselves. These educators depart from rigid class formats and allow students, whenever possible, to participate in the design, implementation, and evaluation of course content. They also share some of themselves: their struggles, their learning processes, their successes and failures, and some of their personal lives. There are no illusions about who really holds the power in the classroom, but high expectations are shared, and these professors engage and support their students in their learning. By modeling resilient behaviors, professors may make a significant difference in the lives of their students and become “turnaround teachers”(Benard, 1995; Waxman, et al., 2002).

Best Practices for Facilitating

If we believe students have an innate capacity for resilience, and we wish to cultivate that capacity, we need to engage in nurturing and positive interactions with them. Three environmental protective factors that produce a nurturing classroom climate and positive encounters (Bernard, 1998) are: connection, contribution and competence. Bernard states that “human beings are genetically hardwired to form relationships (social competence), to problem solve (metacognition), to develop a sense of identity (autonomy), and to plan and hope (sense of purpose and future).”

connection

- Elicit students’ concerns and questions and actively listen to their responses;
- Validate students’ feelings (e.g., frustration, fears, stress) as they struggle with college level experiences;
- Approach any dialogue with students in a non-judgmental way. Look beneath and beyond negative behaviors;
- Value students’ time. Be there for office hours and be flexible if students need to see you at other times;
- Convey the message that you are there to help your students by assisting them in connecting to resources that may help them;
- Show simple kindness (e.g., smile, greeting). Lighten up, laugh, and be patient!
- Organize small group interactions in class as a way for students to get to know one another.

contribution

- Provide outlets for student contributions in class (e.g., ask questions that encourage self-reflection, critical thinking and dialogue);
- Make students aware of opportunities for experiential and service learning outside of the classroom;
- Encourage students to assist others through peer tutoring and cooperative learning;
- Use participatory evaluation strategies (e.g., group projects, peer evaluation of assignments, committee work);
- Encourage students to seek out and share resources they have found helpful in completing course work;
- Invite students to serve on department committees, panels, and task forces;
- Encourage students to participate in research projects and present at professional conferences;
- Involve students in designing and implementing the procedures of the course. Engage students in dialogue aimed at resolving problems;
- Include student input in brainstorming to begin the problem solving process;
- Trust students to make a positive contribution to the class.

Resilience in Students

by Jane Munt and Gail Gucker

competence

- Expect students to do their best based on their backgrounds and circumstances;
- Maintain high expectations and make students aware of your belief in their ability to overcome difficulties and become successful;
- Provide constructive feedback and allow students to remediate before grading performance;
- Hold students accountable for meeting deadlines, attending class, and completing assignments to the best of their ability;
- Provide challenging activities during class and through assignments;
- Break larger tasks into segments and monitor progress at each step;
- Provide feedback as often and as early as possible;
- Continually make students aware of progress made and new levels of competence attained;
- Use interests, strengths, and goals as the beginning point for learning;
- Encourage students to see difficulties as temporary and situational;
- Emphasize with students the impact of feelings on behavior;
- Encourage appropriate students to seek out leadership opportunities;
- Assess the students' levels of competency and teach from there;
- Get to know and acknowledge your students' strengths and talents and use them as a springboard for moving forward;

general approaches

-
- Create a safe environment in class/laboratory - go easy on public criticism and sarcasm;
 - Know that you can make a difference;
 - Serve as a role model for resilience by contemplating and discussing ways that one can overcome difficulties;
 - Share your stories, show them how you coped, and coach them to success;
 - Believe that all students are capable of being resilient and access the hope in all students;
 - Teach the students you have, not the students you wish you could have;

Failure—the “F” word. Everyone experiences it. Indeed, it’s required to move from innocence to maturity. When we experience failure, our response comes from the gut. It doesn’t feel good, no matter how insignificant the event. Yet it’s normal to fail, especially in a college environment. For most RIT students, academic success in high school was the norm, a “breeze,” a “joke.” Easy success without trying does not prepare students to cope positively and effectively when they do experience academic failure. It’s no wonder that 80% of students who receive a D/W/F their first year at RIT leave the Institute.

Faculty may not realize that for many students, academic failure may be an entirely new and devastating experience. Students might blow the situation out of proportion, concluding that they are not college material, or that they are in the wrong major. They are intimidated by faculty, and an adverse event such as failing an exam may force a student’s innate resiliency underground, depressing the ability to persist in the educational setting. In fact, a student’s behavior may turn counter-productive, intensifying difficulties. Behaviors such as denial, avoidance, blaming, cheating, lying, and quitting substitute for more proactive behaviors. The student may then resort to withdrawing from the class or, if action is not taken quickly enough, receiving a “D” or “F” grade, eventually spiralling out of the RIT system. And, voilà, we now have a retention issue.

Handled differently, the most effective learning occurs through trial and error. People who are resilient know not to take failure personally. They understand that failure is neither permanent nor pervasive, and that behind every failure, despite the discomfort, is the opportunity to learn, improve, and grow. For some students, resiliency comes naturally. But for many first-year college students, resiliency is a capacity that has yet to be realized.

Faculty and advisors can facilitate resiliency in students by treating academic failure, especially first time failure, as an expected experience. By following up on students who have failed an exam, project, or paper, faculty can coach students to analyze their preparation and performance. They can help students develop problem-solving skills and a larger network of resources. But in order to do this, the student must first experience failure.

Our current generation of traditional college students are the protected, “babies on board” children born in the early 1980’s. A product of soccer moms and esteem-building early education, these students are often under-equipped to deal with failure. Parents become inadvertent enablers when they do everything possible to protect their child from painful experiences and disappointment from not succeeding. However, in order to learn to be a positive, proactive and effective problem-solver, one needs to experience failure. This is why teaching academic intervention strategies to incoming freshmen, who most likely have never experienced academic failure, is ineffective. It’s like giving someone medication *before* they get sick. It just doesn’t work.

The positive side of failure is that it is absolutely necessary for real learning. Pollyanna optimism is a belief that can lead to denial. Resiliency, on the other hand, is the ability to look at the situation realistically and analytically (rather than personally), to believe in one’s own efficacy (the conviction that one is able to solve the problem), to generate options, access resources, and control impulses. A key factor of resiliency is the ability to make do with what is at hand. Inventive/creative problem-solving occurs when we challenge our own preconceived beliefs about *what is*, *why*, and *what’s next*. Some people learn to do this on their own. But others need to be guided in a non-threatening, encouraging manner. And often, the guide can be a faculty member.

A good example of the positive side of failure is David. David came to RIT loaded with AP courses—everything from Physics III to Bio Technology. He also had positive self-esteem from his success in football and high school grades that put him in the top tenth percentile of his graduating class. With SAT scores of 1200, he was accepted at RIT and transitioned beautifully into his major in Computer Engineering Technology. His performance the first four quarters at RIT was good. With little effort, he was able to sustain a 2.5 cum and earned 94% of the credits he attempted.

Fast forward to the holiday break of David's sophomore year when he lifted a heavy piece of luggage and herniated two discs. This adverse event left him with two options: surgery or physical therapy. Both involved a lot of pain. David chose the latter and relied on prescription pain killers, rationalizing that he could get through his course work and not fall behind. However, during the next three quarters David earned only 41% of the credits he attempted, and his quarter GPA dropped from 2.6 to 1.2. He blamed the pain and medication for his academic failure. Eventually he lost interest in his major and "turned lazy"—a real sign of hopelessness.

David was suspended and referred to the College Restoration Program. Several months of struggle and failure made him ripe for exploring other majors and open to applying the skills and strategies CRP had to offer. David marshaled the self-discipline to get off the pain killers. He discovered he was interested in physics. But at mid-quarter he was failing Calculus III, which would prevent an internal transfer from CAST to COS. What David needed at this point was not optimism nor stern lectures. He needed a realistic analysis of the situation and the options he had control over. CRP mentoring helped him to sort things out. He had to stop kidding himself and increase his out-of-class preparation. He needed to do study problems. Daily. The motivation kicked in when he began working with his Calc III professor and started studying between classes in the Bates Learning Center and the LDC Math Lab. He realized he had to put in the time and ask for help when he didn't understand something. He changed his study environment and started following a serious study routine. No more blame, no more rationalizing, just honest hard work. The result was improved test scores, a passing grade, and an academic contract with the Physics Department.

Does the story end there? Only if it's Hollywood. David continues to struggle through course work. But he loves his major and he's better able to meet the challenges and demands. If David had not experienced the adversity of a back injury and subsequent academic failure and suspension, would he be where he is today? Not likely. David is more "seasoned" now. He's proud of his hard work and his ability to face a situation realistically and do something about it. His resiliency is hard earned, as is the case with life's lessons. Without failure and adversity, he would not have experienced true success. Now he's stronger, smarter, focused and motivated, thanks in large part to the "F-word."

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What's Happening at RIT ? An Interview with Lynn Wild by Karen Quinn

Dr. Lynn Wild, Director of RIT's Teaching and Learning Center, is very excited about a pilot program on learned optimism and resilience that she is developing with a recent New York State VATAE grant. This pilot program will focus on the testing of resiliency strategies by a cadre of RIT individuals who will employ these strategies and share them with their colleagues as well as with students.

Dr. Wild works with faculty to improve teaching so that students are successful learners. She also works with administrators, staff, and professional advisors to enhance and support their roles with students.

Dr. Andrew Shatte, co-author of *The Resilience Factor – 7 Essential Skills for Overcoming Life's Inevitable Obstacles*, is Vice President of Research and Development for Adaptiv Learning Systems, and is on the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania. Shatte will be facilitating a workshop for a group of 16 faculty, staff, and advisors from both Student Affairs and Academic Affairs who can immediately incorporate resiliency strategies into the work they do with students. The ultimate goal of the pilot training is to infuse resiliency strategies at a broader level with students, faculty, staff and administrators.

Shatte's work is based on the research of Dr. Martin Seligman. In his book, *Learned Optimism*, Seligman set forth a blueprint for changing from helplessness to resilience. People who are able to bounce back from setbacks explain these events in specific, temporary, and non-personalizing ways. Optimistic people are also able to look at good events in global, permanent, and self-acknowledging ways. Seligman encourages individuals to identify and build on strengths and inner resources, both in ourselves and in helping others, as a key to building resilience.

Dr. Wild also pointed out that resiliency research has been compiled from over 50 years of clinical study and is not limited to academic environments. Resiliency strategies have been successfully implemented in corporations, health care institutions, military organizations, and sports teams, as well as educational institutions.

Dr. Wild feels the time is right to bring resiliency issue to the forefront at RIT. Retention data reveals that 80% of 1st year students who receive a D, W, or F do not return to RIT the following year. Discouragement over poor or failing grades may be a strong contributing factor. Dr. Wild is hoping that teaching students to be more resilient will help them cope in more positive ways to academic setbacks. Dr. Wild looks forward to the RIT community working together to boost student resilience and to increase levels of optimism and resilience in all areas at RIT.

This issue of LDC Lately... is dedicated to Gail Gucker, trusted colleague and friend who has been a driving force in developing and sustaining this newsletter. We wish Gail happiness in her retirement.

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