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## **Introduction**

For those who choose to take on college, the transition can be an exciting time in life; it's the moment teenagers truly begin to become adults, it's that last bit of freedom before we take on the responsibilities of "the real world", and it's a chance to take our education in a direction of our own choosing. Yet, despite all the good that the transition to college brings, it can also bring its own level of stress, anxiety, and challenge. In too many cases these challenges prove too much. As of 2019, the average college dropout rate for the United States sits at 40%. (Strauss) Although most students drop out of school for financial reasons, many students still drop out due to poor academic performance as well as personal issues such as work or family. (Moody)

With such a significant number of students failing to graduate, there has been increased interest on what factors make students successful in higher education. One factor that is being explored more throughout literature is the importance of resilience in college students. Merriam-Webster defines resilience as the ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change. The transition to college is a time of significant change from the difficulty of curriculum, to the changes in an ordinary family dynamic, and often in financial burden; so given how much life changes in this time, it is evident that resilience is an important attribute to build as someone goes through college, but what is still up for debate, and what this paper will address, is what makes college students resilient?

## **Review of the Literature**

### Staying Positive

In researching resiliency, the factor that appears to be the most prominent within existing literature is that having an optimistic outlook or rather maintaining a positive perspective about oneself and life's events helps build resiliency. "Maintaining perspective is described as an individual's capacity to reframe setbacks, maintain a solution focus, and manage negativity. In an academic setting, the ability to maintain perspective supports learning and growth and is inherently related to resilience" (Turner 356)

Even in what are generally considered more vulnerable populations such as individuals from low-income families or those who are first-generation students, having a positive outlook has shown to be an indicator of resilience. "A study conducted by Pascarella and Terenzini, shows that a positive self-concept and a positive mental outlook among undergraduates tend to enrich their college experience because such students are able to intrinsically get motivated to fulfill their academic obligation. Successful low-income/first-generation students have a strong sense of self-efficacy and see themselves as being successful because they work hard." (Himmel 14) This in effect acts as a cycle because they see themselves as working hard, they continue to work hard and achieve a constant level of success.

### Family/Peer Support

Support from family or from peers, also appears often as a factor that leads to greater levels of resiliency. "Successful students rely on their family for support. The role of the parent as a nurturer and encourager plays a big role. In addition, the flexible role of extended family members who provide additional support and the emphasis within the households on positive

achievement is very crucial. Research indicates that students benefit from parental involvement in the following ways: better attendance, higher homework completion rates, higher graduation rates, greater involvement in extracurricular activities, more positive attitudes and better all-round behavior” (Mbindyo 49)

In a study done on 20 Black College students attending a primarily Hispanic University Ten participants recognized a cohesive family unit, encouraging parents, encouraging siblings, and supportive spouses as being instrumental to their academic resilience while experiencing hardship in college. (Hargrove 149)

Support from an individual’s peers is also important. To some, support from one’s peers is arguably more important, because in a college setting, students will likely have more contact with them, and peers will be coming from similar circumstances. “The influence of a peer with the same mindset, goals, and background is crucial to the academic achievement of students, because they recognize that they are not alone in their struggle” (Mbindyo 53) With the proper support system, it may just give students the resilience they need to push through their difficult times. In fact, simply making social connections have been shown to make a difference. Social relationships provide key functions of support, intimacy, companionship, and affirmation that are essential throughout the lifetime, and particularly during stressful transitions. It is further asserted that even limited connections that are perceived as support have the ability to counteract some of the negative effects of stress and bolster an individual’s resilience. (Leary and Derosier 1219)

### Sense of Belonging

In line with the two other common factors already reviewed, a sense of belonging is also garnering significant attention from authors. It may sound similar to peer support, but a

sense of belonging is derived from something greater. It is one thing for those around you to support you, it is something more for an individual to feel as though they are part of the college. “Connectedness is often considered a positive characteristic that facilitates resilience...Although appearing similar to perceived social support, campus connectedness measures beyond this dimension by examining an individual’s perception of fitting in and belonging with others within the university environment” (Pidgeon 16) Further it can be described “as a process by which the participants’ primary motivation was becoming a team member and solidifying interpersonal relationships. (Rogers 121)

In a study done to measure the effect of several factors as facilitators of resilience, students who reported higher levels of psychological distress also reported lower levels of feeling connectedness to their college/university. (Pidgeon 19) In the same study of Black students mentioned earlier, 18 of the 20 men took advantage of support services, of those 18 men, 7 took used some sort of on campus club or group to help counter act the stresses of campus life. (Hargrove 154) Although receiving the support of your peers is important, being a part of something bigger also has its benefits, that feeling of “being part of a team” encourages people to keep pushing to their goal.

### **What Makes College Students Resilient?**

It would be nearly impossible to say there is a definitive factor that makes students, let alone people, resilient. The factors described in the previous section are only a few of the many explanation’s scholars have given for how people develop resilience. The factor that is most discussed in the literature is maintaining a positive attitude, but although authors discuss how important it is, what helps people develop and maintain that positive attitude is not. The answer to this question that will be considered here, is that having religious faith (whether that be

Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, or any other religion) or believing in a higher power is a way to maintain a positive perspective and build resilience. Faith gives people hope, faith makes people feel connected to one another, faith gives people confidence in themselves, and faith gives people confidence in their future; all of which literature has said makes people more resilient.

Many scholars believe that some form of religion has been present as long as humans have been in existence. Ancient artifacts and the way in which ancient humans were buried suggest that older societies believed in some sort of afterlife. Religion served as a way to give meaning to life, a way to form harmony, and to create social harmony. (Long and Mollen 23) This means that since humanity has been in existence, religion has played a part in shaping how it acts. Even in modern history (which scholars generally consider beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and going on into the present), where many argue that religion is on the decline around the world, faith has long been a guide in people's lives, it was and is what some people use to dictate their lives and what many people use to work through difficult times. "Spirituality contributes to the theme of self-awareness through the participant's reliance on religion and/or faith to mitigate stressor effects and propagate hope, strength, and belief in themselves, their abilities, and their future" (Rogers 100)

## Hope

Hope is defined by Merriam-Webster as a "want for something to happen or be true." When people hope, it is a genuine desire for something to happen. Religion gives people hope, and when things get difficult in school, people need the actual desire to overcome them. If an individual has no desire to complete a task, they won't. Through belief in a higher power, individuals look past the moment that they are struggling in and understand that there is something more, that the moment they are struggling to overcome is only a smaller piece of a

much larger objective, and in turn recognize that there is a chance of success worth pursuing. “Hope is a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal-directed energy), and (b) pathways (planning to meet goals)” (Dholakia)

In a study done to research what made students successful during nursing school, multiple nurses indicated that their faith gave them hope in times of adversity and inspired them to work through their difficulties. One Nurse noted that during one particularly difficult semester she had been having a difficult time understanding the material and had failed the same test twice, she had only one more attempt before she would be removed from the program. She stated that she prayed every night. “I know you’re busy and you’ve got way more people who have worse circumstances, but if you want me to do this, you’ve gotta send me a sign”. Then I went to Price Chopper after clinical that night and I hear “nice scrubs”. He was huge, probably 6’7” and told me he graduated from my college in 2013 and, “I know you feel like you can’t do it, but you can”. Before I left the grocery store, I said to him, “Just so you know, God sent you today”. She would go on to pass the exam and graduate the program. (Rogers 100) Without that positive reinforcement to give her hope that she had a chance of success, the outcome may have been different.

There are some scholars who argue that the benefits of hope are actually outweighed by its potential to further damage an individual in the event that they fail and lose any sense of optimism. (Dholakia) Professor Dholakia of the University of Houston stated of Hope, “the concept of hope seemed to me to be a decidedly inferior concept, like a cocktail of optimism mixed in with a bit of desperation and a dash of wishful thinking”, noting that even Frederick Nietzsche himself is quoted as saying “Hope is the most evil of evils because it prolongs man's

torment.” The reality, is that hope is crucial to building resilience because without any feeling of hope, people will not believe that they even have the ability to make it through difficult times, and then will not even bother to try. “With hope people embrace such self-talk agentic phrases as “I can do this” and “I am not going to be stopped”. Hope enables an individual to cope with a stressful situation by expecting a positive outcome. Because a positive outcome is expected, the individual is motivated to act in the face uncertainty” (Kiramani 263) The nursing student mentioned needed to hear that she had a chance of success, that she had a hope of making it through, and with the inspiration she gained from that hope which derived from her faith, she made it through her nursing school.

### Belonging

Gaining a sense of belonging is also an important factor in promoting resilience. Having faith has the ability to bring people together and make an individual feel like they belong to something more, a larger group of people who are there for them to help them through difficult times. “Blundo (2002) highlighted the importance of social networks such as places of worship, and community agencies in promoting resilience. Results indicated that interactions with peers and social relationships are key factors in reducing stress and promoting mental health.” (Long 82) Things such as religious services (Friday Khutbah, Saturday Shabbat, Sunday Mass, etc.), campus-based religious group meetings, and even events sponsored by religious institutions can provide students the opportunity to meet like-minded people and make them feel more accepted and involved in their college, or at the very least feel like they have people who support them.

Not only can social isolation and the feeling of being alone cause its own health issues, it also creates even more anxiety than students already face in their everyday life. This additional stress hurts student’s resilience. By partaking in extracurricular activity such as faith based

events, students get the chance to meet similar people, as well as meet people who may be in situations similar to their own who can provide guidance, support, and inspiration as examples of other students that have endured and survived difficult times.

Several authors have argued that humans do not actually need other humans to feel better about themselves. They state that people only need to interact with one another to complete life essential tasks, and that emotional support is not one of those. “Social interactions are important both for getting things that we need and for accomplishing important tasks. In this way, we are like all animal species, who all need to interact with others to get things done. But once those tasks are accomplished, it is not essential that the social relationships move beyond that point.” (Morgan) What they are not accounting for is that while some people do successfully navigate life independently and prefer a higher degree of social isolation; it has been shown consistently in literature that individuals who receive higher levels of support, whether it is from the institution itself or peers, show lower likelihood of depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues. (Hefner and Eisenberg 496)

Another minor benefit is the increase in likelihood that individuals simply see themselves as being supported by others, even if there is little to no physical support from others. Even if students do not have genuine support, just having a perception that others support them has benefits. “Religious faith and spirituality are associated with more optimistic life orientation, greater perceived social support and higher resilience in stress and lower levels of anxiety.” (Annalakshmi 720) Meaning that even just the feeling that there is someone to support them through difficult times can give them enough mental drive to build resilience and over-come obstacles.

## Self-Confidence

One of the most important aspects of maintaining a positive attitude that helps build resilience, is having confidence in oneself and in one's own abilities. If someone does not have the confidence or belief that they possess the skills, knowledge, or ability to succeed, that lack of confidence will damage their ability to maintain a positive attitude, and in turn damage their performance under pressure. In a German study done to better understand the ways in which resilience is associated with anxiety and depression, researchers found that a lack of confidence was a strong indicator of lower levels of resilience, and that correlation could be used as a predictor of a "lack of desire to take on challenges" (Bitsika 14)

Faith can give people the confidence in themselves to take on challenges that they alone would feel inadequate to handle because they feel that they have help from someone or something more powerful than themselves. Several nurses from the study mentioned earlier stated this in regard to their faith and their ability to make it through their nursing program:

Hannah describes her use of faith as a resource within herself that assisted in her successful completion of nursing school. "Definitely my faith is a huge part of it, just because you know in the Bible it says, "God is your strength" and I think of something higher than myself that is giving me strength... like that is such an encouragement. Like, even if I am not enough, there's somebody stronger than me that has me even when I'm failing. (Rogers 100)

Christina describes her reliance on spirituality as a mitigating source for stress but also as a confirmation source that she is doing what she is meant to be doing in His eyes. "God. Prayer. 100%. I even have my rosary out when I take my exams... Every time I start getting fogged up with the questions, I'll just lay my hand on the rosary and think to myself, "Just help me work through it". Prayer has been huge for me." (Rogers 100)

Both nurses make statements that may seem to show a lack of confidence, and some may argue that requiring a belief in something other than oneself is further evidence that someone lacks confidence in their own abilities, but really these quotes are evidence that through their faith these women have confidence in their ability to succeed. Their faith makes them confident that they will have the strength to overcome the challenges, whether or not they realize their resilience come from themselves, their faith is simply the way in which their resilience is expressed. Their faith does not somehow overcome their problems for them, but rather serves as the extra strength and focus they need to overcome the challenges that they face in their pursuit of higher education. Their faith may inspire them, but they are still the ones that must perform and overcome.

### The Future

The last way in which faith helps build resilience is through its ability to give individuals a positive outlook about their future. Unless people have something to look forward to and unless people see there is a reason to take on certain challenges, there is no reason to carry on through difficult times. Lacking a sense of purpose, or rather being uncertain about one's future has been shown to cause people to avoid challenge entirely, and without any sort of challenge in life rarely is there any sort of progression. (Bitsika 14) In the previously mentioned study done on Black males going through college, the prospect of social mobility served as one of the primary self-proclaimed factors that kept many motivated to push through difficult times. (Hargrove 142) In this instance, these Black students who generally came from lower income families felt that although higher education was difficult, the prospect that afterwards they could have better lives was worth the mental toll that the difficulty of higher education placed on them. Through faith, people can better see a positive future.

One of the students from this same study noted that not only was his decision to choose his major the result of a conversation with God in which he was told that his life's purpose was counseling others, but his decision to carry on through difficult times was a result of his belief that God had a plan for him. "It just basically was something like a hurdle, it was some adversity. This is a little turbulence, but this too shall pass, you just have to stick in there, because if God told you something and when you think back on that you're like, "This cannot be wrong, you know, this can't be wrong, so God's not wrong, so I have to press forward no matter what it takes." (Hargrove 147) Additionally, there is evidence of this seen in students from the earlier mentioned nursing program. Several of the students noted that their faith not only guided them toward nursing but also helped create a "self-awareness" about who they were, what they were doing, and what they were capable of. Their faith served as reassurance for their academic plans, as well as confirmation of their perceived life purpose. (Rogers 128) If someone believes that through their spirituality they are destined for something greater, it keeps them focused on the bigger picture, as opposed to seeing challenges as the failing and ultimate end of their efforts, they can be seen, as this student puts it, as nothing more than a "hurdle" or a trial meant to build their character on the journey to their ultimate success and development.

This idea can also be seen in other areas of life where people endured stress and needed resilience to persevere. In a study done on soldiers who had been taken prisoner during the Vietnam War, it was found that the majority of those who made it through the trauma of their experience used some form of religion to help them cope with the stress. They sought support from God and prayed that they would survive, believing that God would help them through, and give them a future to look forward too. (Long 87) That is not to discount the fact that there are some who will see the challenges in life as a form of punishment or abandonment that could

further the stress they enduring, but as noted in both the study on Black males going through college and the study on returning Vietnam War veterans, evidence suggests that most people will view their challenges and their future in a positive way, as a some sort of “turbulence” on the road to reaching their goals rather than their demise.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Faith builds resilience through its ability to give people hope, to give them a sense of belonging, to give them self-confidence, and to give them a positive outlook towards their future. Faith has always had some influence on humanity, on a larger scale it has brought communities together, inspired artists, and brought about social change; and on a personal level, faith can carry people through difficult times and bring out the best in themselves. Despite faiths ability to influence people and societies for the better, author Shelley Long notes, that has not always been the case. “Religion has also divided families and relationships, disturbed lives, and destroyed careers across sectarian divides. On an individual level, religion has caused psychological suffering, and has led to guilt fear and anxiety. Religion has hindered educational development taught rigid way of thinking and behaving. Led to authoritarian parenting styles justified social stratification of the most unjust and malicious kind, led to oppressive attitudes toward sexuality and impeded creative expression” (Long 42)

It would be misleading to not acknowledge the fact that religion has been responsible for some level of stress in the lives of many people throughout all human history. As noted earlier, faith has the capacity to cause further stress; fears that God or another entity may have abandoned them have the capacity to cause hope to fail, individuals may find themselves ostracized if they feel their beliefs do not match up with a particular religion, their self-

confidence could be damaged if they feel that they have faith but receive nothing in return, and the future may appear bleak if they feel that they are not supported.

Despite these possible negative outcomes and some of the historical problems associated with faith and religion, recent studies show that the influences of faith generally yield positive results. In the study done on Black college students, 56% of the students involved stated that spiritual faith was an important element in helping them overcome their desire to quit and motivating them to accept the challenges they would face. (Hargrove 142) Although many will still attribute faith to the long standing and rigid religious institutions in the United States, faith has the ability to adapt as society does. The most common religions of 1500 years ago are a far cry from what are the most common religions today. In the same vein of thought, where in the past being considered religious required membership in a religious institution, faith now is seen as something much more personal and adaptable. Ask anyone in the street what religion they are and if they agree with all of the tenants of their religion, and there will likely be caveats within their answer.

It is this personal and adaptable faith that has the greatest potential to build resilience, and that has shown to help students push through. Of course, in regard to building resilience in college students, it would not appropriate to suggest that every student pick up some sort of religion; but what may help is to suggest that students reconnect with their faith on any level. What is beneficial about faith, is that there is no one faith or one way to practice faith. Nor are there requirements to believe on a personal level. In terms of faith as a tool to build resilience, there are many approaches. Although in this paper examples generally referenced the God of Christianity, there are many other versions of God, there are religions with multiple gods, and

there are religions with no gods at all. Religions of nature are common throughout the world, especially in East Asia.

Resilience is a critical asset as students take on the challenges in life and as they progress through school, many of which may seem impossible to take on alone. As the paper suggests, although there may not be someone physically there to assist students through the challenge's college brings, there does not need to be. Faith does not have borders or requirements to take part, although traditional religion is certainly not the answer for every student, taking a moment to reflect on life and the individuals connection to the greater world can serve as its own form of faith. The most important aspect of building resilience through faith is that the individual believes in something more, they believe that in some way they are connected to a higher power that helps them focus on the challenges in front of them, and gives them purpose. Faith is a tool accessible to anyone and with proven benefits, so for any students looking for a way to build there resilience, they may want to take a moment to reflect and connect.



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