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Teaching Resilient Mindsets: Developing a Model and an Active Learning Workshop for First-Year College Students. *A Practice Report*

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Abstract

This practice report describes the development of a compensatory educational model to introduce first-year college students to resilient mindsets. The Teaching Resilient Mindsets Model emphasized (1) realistic expectations, (2) an "always learning" mindset, and (3) being prepared for challenges before they arise. After development, the Teaching Resilient Mindsets Model was delivered during freshman orientation via an active learning workshop. At the resilience workshop students practiced core components of the model and built a "resilience toolbox" to take with them as a resource for their transition to college. Experiential evidence of student engagement alongside quantitative and qualitative reflections from students emphasized the efficacy of the workshop and the opportunities it provided to practice resilient mindsets and prepare for potential challenges. The practice report ends with personal reflections on the (un)expected impacts of the workshop as well as opportunities for improvement.

***Keywords**:* Resilience; teaching resilient mindsets; freshman orientation; active learning.

Introduction

The transition from high school to college in the US is a challenging time in emerging adulthood. In the summer months leading up to their freshman year[1], individuals often experience heightened levels of anxiety and depression (Conley et al., 2014, 2020; Kroshus et al., 2021). During the first year, nearly a third of freshmen experience symptoms that would warrant a diagnosis of anxiety disorder or major depressive disorder (Auerbach et al., 2018). Compounding these mental health issues, freshmen are the most likely to experience severe academic difficulties and the least likely to be retained, a phenomenon captured by the term freshman attrition (Amirkhan & Kofman, 2018). Together, these trends underscore the importance of equipping incoming freshmen with the skills that they need to flourish in their new college environment.

Understanding the academic, social, and emotional difficulties experienced by young adults transitioning from high school to college requires an appreciation of both the risk factors, as well as the protective factors that uniquely impact this group. As any general psychology textbook readily proclaims, stress is a significant risk factor, consisting of major life events, daily hassles, and life changes. Importantly, the categories themselves are not inherently bad. Life changes, for example, can be

[1] A freshman is an undergraduate student in their first year of college/university.

positive or negative, major or minor, yet they can all contribute to an individual's stress quotient. For college students, traditionally negative (e.g., leaving a trusted social group) and positive (e.g., establishing new relationships) experiences are both quantified as significant stressors, as are more common activities like registering for classes or declaring a major (Renner & Mackin, 1998). When recognizing that all change can contribute to stress, it becomes easier to understand why freshmen, in particular, struggle with personal well-being, academic achievement, and a desire to stay at a particular institution. Notably, the perceived magnitude of changes during one's freshman year may loom large for first-generation students or those from historically marginalized backgrounds. These individuals are less likely to have had exposure to, or preparation for, the implicit and explicit norms that operate within academic institutions, norms that have historically served those who are wealthy, white, and male. Indeed, symptoms of anxiety and depression tend to be most pronounced for college students who identify as first-generation, women, or sexual minorities (Amirkhan & Kofman, 2018; Kroshus et al., 2021).

Of course, not all college freshmen struggle with the transition. Individuals of all identities can (and do) flourish, both mentally, and academically, in their first year of college even whilst experiencing significant stressors. The discrepancies can, in part, be explained by research that identifies protective factors, those that buffer individuals from the negative consequences of experiencing stressors. Whether deeply ingrained individual differences or hard-earned cognitive and behavioral skills that allow individuals to reframe or cope with stress in positive ways, they are almost all directly connected to the broader construct of resilience. Resilience is often colloquially defined as the ability to "bounce back" from stressors (Smith et al., 2008). By definition, then, resilience is a process that plays out as one encounters, and navigates, a risk factor. Those deemed high in resilience are less likely to incur a negative outcome, even in the face of consistent risks (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Notably, resilience is generally conceptualized as a multi-faceted construct, with a large emphasis on developable skills. This approach makes resilience a particularly lucrative factor to assess when considering ways to support emerging adults through their transition to college.

Resilience and Student Success

Resilience is associated with factors that are important for the success of college students such as mental and emotional health (Hu et al., 2015). While both can indirectly affect student performance and retention, resilience has also been directly connected to skills that facilitate strong academic outcomes. Resilient students tend to exhibit higher levels of motivation and determination. When they encounter academic obstacles, they are more likely to view these challenges as opportunities for growth rather than insurmountable barriers (Jowkar et al., 2014). This positive outlook can foster a love for learning and contribute to a lifelong commitment to education. As a result, students with more developed resilience maintain a strong commitment to their educational goals and are less likely to give in to feelings of discouragement.

Beyond an orientation toward growth, resilience fosters effective coping strategies that help students manage stress, anxiety, and other emotional hurdles that are common during their educational journey. In contrast, those with lower resilience may find themselves overwhelmed by academic stressors, potentially leading to disengagement and burnout (Wu et al., 2020). Resilience also promotes better problem-solving skills, as it encourages students to approach challenges with a solution-oriented mindset. They are more likely to seek help and utilize available resources when they encounter academic difficulties. This proactive attitude contributes to better academic performance as they adapt and find ways to address their learning gaps. In summary, resilience is critical for student success. A lack of resilience can significantly impact academic outcomes by undermining motivation, increasing stress, hindering problem-solving skills, and fostering a negative attitude toward education. Recent research has even shown that resilience is a better predictor of academic outcomes, like retention, than conceptually related constructs, like grit. These trends appear to be most pronounced when assessing outcomes for vulnerable populations of students (Caporale-Berkowitz et al., 2022). Recognizing the profound connections between resilience, mental health, and academic success highlights the importance of fostering resilience in students, not only to promote their mental well-being but also to empower them to excel in their educational pursuits. Given their investment in students' personal and academic well-being, educational institutions and individual educators should aim to create programs that help students cultivate resilience. Doing so will equip students with a valuable skill set that transcends the boundaries of mental health and academic achievement (de Oliveira Durso et al., 2021).

Cultivating Resilience

Myriad models explore *how* individuals are resilient, though Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) suggest that they tend to fall into three primary categories: compensatory, protective, or challenge models. Compensatory models focus on factors that can be applied to counteract a specific risk (e.g., safe-sex education for adolescents). Protective models focus on individual differences that moderate the link between a risk and a negative outcome (e.g., parental support). Finally, challenge models

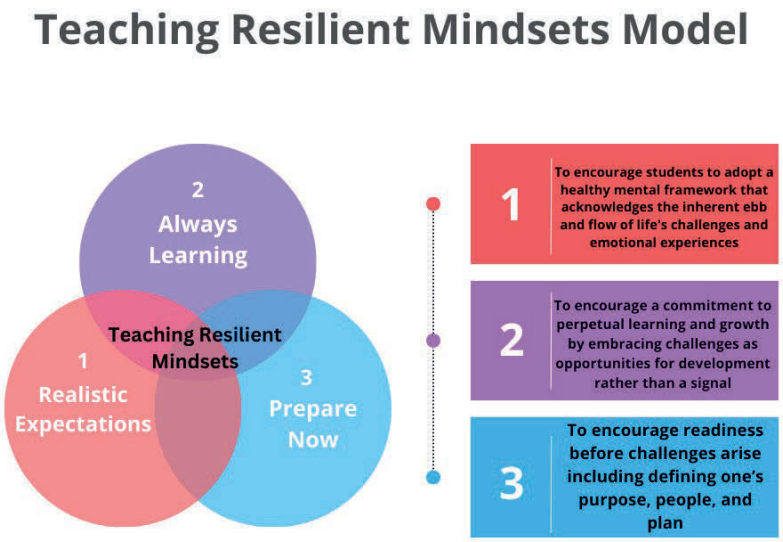
seek to understand the "sweet spot" between too much and too little exposure to a potential risk factor. Much like a muscle needs to spend time under tension to grow, challenge models assume that a certain amount of exposure to risk is necessary to cultivate resilience. This triangulated approach allows researchers to consider how resilience might be "built in"' for some people (protective), can be developed with the right "training environment" over time (challenge), or even achieved through targeted interventions in the face of a specific stressor or risk factor (compensatory). Consistent with this framework, much of the research on building resilience has focused on the efficacy of personal interventions such as mindfulness or willpower (Morrison & Aileen, 2017) or assessed how the presence of mentors and specific life events predict resilience (Serrano & Sanz, 2019). Factors such as personal satisfaction, the classroom environment, and interpersonal relationships between teachers and students, for example, play pivotal roles in fostering resilience among students. These elements serve as protective factors, contributing to the enhancement of both academic and educational performance (Godoy et al., 2021). Notwithstanding the value of this work, a paucity of research has directly addressed large-scale educational efforts to counterbalance the acute risk that all freshman students face as they transition to college. To this end, we developed a compensatory educational model for introducing students to the concept of "Resilient Mindsets."

A Model for Teaching Resilient Mindsets

Given the unique challenges that first-year college students face, our Teaching Resilient Mindsets Model was designed to introduce first-year college students to information that could potentially offset some of the heightened risk factors typically encountered in the initial transition to college. Specifically, we propose three core components for the Teaching Resilient Mindsets Model (see *Figure 1*).

Figure 1

Teaching Resilient Mindsets Model



Realistic Expectations

The goal of this first component of the Teaching Resilient Mindsets model is to encourage students to adopt a healthy mental framework that acknowledges the inherent ebb and flow of life's challenges and emotional experiences. College students are often showered with advice and platitudes as they are entering college, "you are going to be great" and "college was the best time of my life" are two phrases our students hear often. Although well-meaning, when such sentiments are not clearly balanced with others like, "it's normal to struggle with your classes" or "there were also times in college when I felt really alone" they may reinforce unrealistic expectations or leave students to feel like they cannot be honest about their academic struggles. Instead of trying to normalize these experiences when they are encountered, it is useful to set the stage for students early on so that they have realistic expectations and the opportunity to normalize the struggles that they might encounter in college before they are personalized.

Always Learning

The goal of this component of the Teaching Resilient Mindsets Model is to encourage students to acknowledge that in a true community of learners everyone is always learning. Adopting this perspective requires students to embrace challenges as necessary opportunities for growth rather than a signal that one does not belong or is not "cut out" for higher education. This is particularly important for students from underrepresented backgrounds who are most likely to view the personal and academic struggles they experience during college as signals that they do not belong.

Prepare Now

The final component of our Teaching Resilient Mindsets Model focuses on the preparatory work that needs to be completed before challenges arise. We break this work down into three parts: Purpose, People, Plan. Each of these steps is critical to be able to "bounce back" from challenges or to overcome risk factors. A clearly articulated purpose can be a source of strength for why someone would even attempt to persist through a difficult time. Having a well-defined social network and plan for the dos and don'ts of one's personal mental, spiritual and physical well-being can not only provide easily accessible coping mechanisms (and an avoidance of those that are less healthy) in trying times, but may also create a foundational level of psychological well-being that mitigates the perceived gravity of challenges in the first place.

Resilient Mindset Workshop Development and Implementation

We utilized our Teaching Resilient Mindsets Model to guide the creation of an active learning workshop for first-year college students. The workshop was delivered to all incoming students during freshman orientation and as such served as a compensatory resilience intervention during a critical time of transition and risk. Given the back-to-back programming during freshman orientation, we designed the 60 minute workshop to be as interactive as possible while also connecting students with important tools and resources about resilience that they could revisit on their own. Such goals were aligned with the understanding that cultivating resilience requires both awareness and active repetition (Bell, 2001). The general premise was "building your resilience toolbox." Throughout the session, students built boxes that they filled with activities, resources, and reflections designed to introduce students to resilience. Following our Teaching Resilient Mindsets Model, the workshop was broken into three sections and had three primary aims. The first two were cognitive in nature, denoted by the acronym, Get REAL (realistic expectations, always learning). The third was behavioral as students were instructed on how to complete their "Purpose, People, Plan" worksheet. The slides and materials used throughout the workshop are available at https://osf.io/njys8/?view_only=2741fa512d6b4ed2a302f54266ace2a7

Realistic Expectations

Students were asked to reflect, in provided journals, on an abundant life. The prompt read, "Take a moment to imagine what an abundant life looks like for you. Write about that life in as much detail as possible." Upon completion of this task, students shared what they wrote in small groups, trying to identify common themes among them. Students were then prompted to consider, as a group, "how do you know this is an abundant life?". Students were given opportunities to share their responses and then we discussed, as an entire group, the potential pitfalls of over-emphasizing positive affect (e.g., happiness) as a singular indicator of an abundant life. To normalize both highs and lows we each shared a brief story about a low personal moment during college. These stories were used to prompt the students to brainstorm potential setbacks or challenges someone might experience in their first year of college. Students were then asked to apply the scenarios they generated to the following fill-in-the-blank questions in their journal, "It would not be uncommon to experience ____ during your first year of college. If this happened to a friend, I would tell them ____." These activities were designed to normalize experiencing challenges and negative emotions.

Always Learning

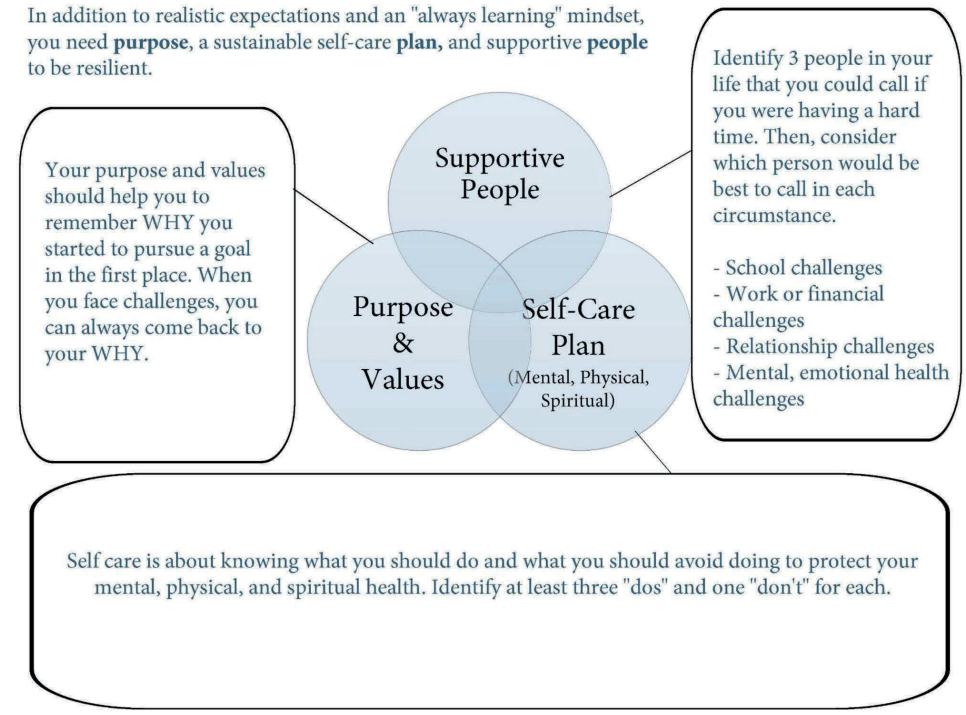
To emphasize the importance of an "always learning" attitude, students were asked to reflect on a challenge they had overcome and what they learned from the experience. Such activities can be useful to remind students that they are indeed already resilient and that there is growth that comes through challenge or difficulty. After writing about a particular experience in their journals, students were asked to share their "life lesson" with a partner in their small group. Finally, students were prompted to think of (or look up) mantras, sayings, religious verses, or other forms of encouragement that they found useful in times of stress or significant challenge. We gave examples like "I haven't—yet" from Carol Dweck's growth mindset work as well as others that have helped us personally such as "failure is feedback." Students were also asked to write these encouragements as well as personal strategies for maintaining or cultivating mental, spiritual and physical health on provided popsicle sticks. Finally, students were asked to exchange popsicle sticks with others in their group so that each person would walk out of the workshop with new encouraging messages and ideas for holistic health habits to put in their resilience boxes.

Purpose, People, Plan

The final piece of our workshop was focused on how to individually tailor resilience content and create a plan for how to deal with future challenges or times of stress. Recognizing that there are individual differences and not all strategies will work for all people, students were given time to complete a worksheet (see *Figure 2*) to identify their: (1) Purpose and values, (2) Supportive people, (3) Self-care plan. A primary scaffolding for this activity, shared with students, was that it is very difficult to come up with a plan for how to be resilient or care for yourself well in times of intense crisis or challenge. The worksheet students were given was blank, but an example of ideas to put in each of the three sections were presented in the slides. We encouraged students to hang this plan up in a location that they can see it or to leave it in their boxes so they could access it when they experienced low moments or challenges throughout their first quarter. At the end of the workshop, we displayed a QR code for students which linked them to a living Google Document full of resources, many of which were curated for students with marginalized identities

Figure 2

Purpose, People, Plan Worksheet



Evidence of Student Engagement with the Teaching Resilient Mindsets Model

Evidence of student engagement with the Teaching Resilient Mindsets Model delivered at the Get REAL Workshop was demonstrated experientially during the workshop itself and through student responses to a standardized post-orientation survey. The survey, administered to all incoming freshmen, assessed perceptions about the efficacy of each individual orientation session as well as several themes of student success (e.g., belonging, academic preparedness, opportunities to practice wellness). Students were also given an opportunity to provide comments about each session via an open-ended response format. Forty students who attended our workshop responded to the questionnaire. Student ratings indicated that they believed the workshop was effective. What is more, perceptions of effectiveness were also significantly correlated with a number of components of student success (see https://osf.io/njys8/?view_only=2741fa512d6b4ed2a302f54266ace2a7 for detailed results).

Beyond student reflections that the workshop was effective at introducing them to the concepts of resilience and resilient mindsets, there were several pieces of evidence that demonstrated student engagement with and opportunities to practice the

three primary components of Resilient Mindsets presented during our workshop. One of the most evident forms of engagement occurred when students brainstormed potential challenges that a freshman might encounter in college. Examples of these challenges included failing a class, ending a romantic relationship, and losing touch with high school friends. The group-related nature of this exercise helped students recognize potential challenges beyond those that they immediately anticipated for themselves. The value of this exercise was seen in qualitative responses on the post-orientation survey. For example, one student said, "I found it very helpful with prepping me emotionally for the ups and downs of college." This reflection speaks to the utility of realistic expectations to help students to feel prepared for college. Such connections may help to explain the strong correlation between the efficacy of our workshop and academic preparedness ratings in the post-orientation survey.
Another integral facet of our Resilient Mindsets Model is the ethos of perpetual learning and evolving as a signal of belonging to a community of learners. At the workshop students openly discussed past challenges and lessons learned in a way that allowed them to connect with one another, not simply on their shared aspirations, but also their shared experiences of struggle and growth. In one unforgettable moment, a student shared with the entire group of 350+ students how the loss of a close friendship taught them about boundary setting and the need for a broad social support network. In smaller settings, students similarly shared relatable challenges. One student expressed:

> I remember a time when I felt like I was facing a couple of challenges in school. One of the struggles was not being able to make friends or feel connected to the school community. Another issue was getting bad grades, mainly because of the change in environment and some other circumstances.

The student's vulnerability normalized academic struggles while their presence at orientation was an embodied testament to their persistence. Such stories also created opportunities to acknowledge the very same risk factors that these students were about to endure - a disrupted sense of belonging and significant environmental changes.

The final component of our model emphasizes the need to be prepared in order to be resilient. We challenged students to think about preparedness in three ways, identifying their social support network, articulating their "why" for college, and creating habits for wellness that include spiritual mental and physical health. Although students did not submit their plans to us, there was evidence that students meaningfully worked through these activities, even when they were uncomfortable. For example, one of our qualitative responses emphasized how difficult it was to think through the "supportive people" part of their plan because they struggled to identify three people they could call in a time of need. While this initial reaction was one of discomfort, it also brought awareness about potential risk factors and highlighted an area for growth in the process of becoming more resilient. Other experiences, like opportunities to reflect upon and vocalize their own sense of purpose, were more positive for students. In response to an all-group prompt about what it means to have an "abundant life", students shared complex definitions grounded in an unshakable sense of self, unending self-growth, purpose through philanthropy, and a deep sense of social interdependence. Student engagement with the preparation component of our Resilient Mindsets Model was also evidenced during the popsicle stick exchange. Students were asked to identify mantras or self-care activities into three distinct groups: mental, spiritual, and physical. Following are anecdotes from two students who participated in the workshop:

> *Mental:* I decided to take a social media cleanse and reach out to a friend for support." "I created a playlist especially when I knew I needed to take a break and get away from the noise.
>
> *Spiritual:* I found solace in reading the Bible, attending Bible studies, praying, and spending time in worship." "I have a gratitude journal that I write in daily that allows me to remember the importance of myself.
>
> *Physical*: I realized the importance of taking care of my body, and working out a few days a week." "I am strong.

It is also worth noting that quantitative data from the post-orientation survey suggested that the efficacy of our workshop was positively associated with students' feelings of belonging, sense of vocation, and their opportunities to practice wellness during orientation. Each of these outcomes is clearly connected to the "Purpose, People, Plan" worksheet that students completed during our workshop as well as many of the group activities. For example, students were asked to reflect on their "why" for college and consider their long term goals and values, an exercise that helps to clarify one's sense of vocation. Additionally, students were asked to consider their spiritual, mental and physical health from both a "do" and "don't" perspective. This allowed them to practice and plan for wellness both in terms of approach (e.g., do drink water) and avoid (e.g., don't look up my exes on social media) goals. Our data suggest that the more students engaged with and found our workshop effective, the more they experienced critical markers of student success, not only necessary for retention, but more importantly, well-being.

Teaching Resilient Mindsets Workshop Reflection

Both during and after the workshop there was clear evidence of efficacy and student engagement with each of the three primary components of our Teaching Resilient Mindsets Model. We suspect that much of this success can be attributed to the design of the workshop, which was deeply rooted in evidence-based pedagogy. For example, we leveraged student-centered activities including personal journal reflections, opportunities to share current knowledge and experiences with other students, as well as time to create individually tailored resilience plans. Such an approach empowered students to engage in their educational journey, and fostered a dynamic and participatory learning experience (Muniandy & Abdullah, 2023).

Our workshop also engaged a variety of active learning techniques. Indeed, it was the interactive nature that shone as the primary theme in students' qualitative reflections about the workshop. The building of resilience boxes created a foundation for a hands-on, interactive and memorable learning experience. Students were also challenged to engage in high-level metacognitive processes such as reflecting on past growth and anticipating future challenges. Finally, we utilized think-pair-share activities to give students time to deepen and crystalize their thought processes before sharing with others. Such strategies provided interactive alternatives to a traditional lecture in a way that required critical thinking and was conducive to a diverse body of learners (Brame, 2016), ultimately transcending even student perceptions of efficacy.

Finally, we utilized trauma-informed pedagogy to acknowledge the experiences of students both within and beyond the classroom and to create a secure space for students to share without fear of ridicule or harassment (Carello & Butler, 2014). We did this by having students gather in pre-established groups (who they had been with all orientation weekend) and telling personal stories about our own academic failures and relational difficulties. The value of these techniques was readily apparent during a group-wide discussion where several students volunteered to share their own stories of hardship. At the same time, a few student comments mentioned that it was difficult or awkward to share because their orientation groups never bonded. Although our workshop was offered as the last session at student orientation, more time to scaffold trauma-informed pedagogy, deepen connections, and engage in more gradual self-disclosure would have been particularly beneficial.

Delivering the workshop also provided an opportunity to reflect on the practical utility of our Teaching Resilient Mindsets Model. Generally, we agreed that the model was well designed for first-year students navigating a significant life transition. Additionally, the content and delivery appeared to be well suited for a single, relatively short, teaching session with a large audience. It may be less well suited for an entire course or an audience looking for a deep dive on the academic literature supporting the construct and cultivation of resilience. Further, by focusing on Resilient Mindsets, our model leveraged a compensatory model of resilience. In doing so, it avoided introducing students to aspects of resilience that are beyond their control in a given moment (e.g., parental support, continued exposure to specific stressors).

Reflections on what we would do differently centered largely around logistical concerns, like the length of time and complications of distributing materials to several hundred students, rather than meaningful changes to the structure of our model. Students who did not find the workshop as effective affirmed these personal critiques. Examples include responses like, "I think it just took a long time to get set up considering we needed to get materials together, but it was good in getting the point across." Of course, future empirical research will be necessary to explore whether or not active learning Resilient Mindsets workshops have the power to measurably enhance resilience, or core aspects of resilient mindsets.

Conclusion

In conclusion, freshmen often find themselves in uncharted territory as they step onto the college campus. The shift in academic expectations, coupled with new social dynamics, can be both exciting and overwhelming. Our Teaching Resilient Mindsets Model and corresponding Get REAL workshop were crafted to compensate for the heightened risks first-year students face. While a single hour of content is unlikely to immediately improve an individual's resilience, such learning opportunities can help students approach the world with a more resilient frame of mind, normalizing the highs and lows of the college experience, and rejecting the fallacy that struggles are a signal that they do not belong. The activities leveraged to teach Resilient Mindsets encouraged students to take ownership of their resilience-building process. We suspect they can also promote the self-awareness and introspection necessary to develop resilience over time. Finally, such workshops can provide practical opportunities to construct plans that, if followed, can create a firm foundation of well-being that facilitate one's ability to bounce back from future stressors.

Although there are several ways that the Resilience Workshop could be further developed, experiential evidence during the workshop as well as a post-orientation survey data emphasized its efficacy. Of particular interest, the workshop provided clear

opportunities to engage with the cognitive and behavioral components of our Teaching Resilient Mindsets Model. Further, because the efficacy of the session was correlated with outcomes like belonging as well as opportunities to practice wellness, it is possible that the workshop could have ripple effects extending to retention and well-being. Given the significant psychological and academic struggles that accompany transitioning from high school to college, our work offers a model for educational institutions to introduce first year students to the concept of resilience by teaching Resilient Mindsets. The benefits of doing so are likely to extend well-beyond freshman year, equipping students with the tools they need to navigate the many changes and challenges that they will experience throughout the course of their lifespans.

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