



# “Minor Setback, Major Comeback”: A Multilevel Approach to the Development of Academic Resilience

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**Abstract:** This study examined communicative processes at multiple levels that may influence students' academic resilience through transitions. Participant interviews ( $N = 23$ ) revealed that at the individual level, students develop a resilient mindset and effective academic strategies, engage in self-care, and compartmentalize. At the relational level, students rely on teachers to demonstrate positive teaching behaviors, receive academic and emotional support from a variety of sources, and find role models to inspire resilience. Finally, students reported that the campus community gave opportunities to build support networks and access campus resources, but identified threats to effective use of these resilience-building opportunities. Finally, all but one theme demonstrated that the development of academic resilience typically happens outside the traditional classroom yet affects student performance inside the classroom. These findings contribute to instructional communication research because of the application of an underutilized theory and method in instructional research, the multilevel focus on communication and resilience development processes, and by providing practical insight to create targeted approaches to improve student resilience and related outcomes.

Academic resilience, defined as the ability for students to maintain high motivation and performance when faced with events that put them at academic risk (M. C. Wang et al., 1994), has declined at an alarming rate (Gray, 2015). This decline in resilience can manifest in multiple ways, including lower retention and graduation rates. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the undergraduate

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student retention rate in 4-year institutions is 81% and the 6-year graduation rate hovers around 60% (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017). The (in)ability for students to academically recover is indicative of their resilience, highlighting an indirect link between academic resilience and retention (Eisenberg et al., 2016). Given these integrated issues of resilience, retention, and graduation, universities have prioritized programs to address how we may better retain students when they are faced with academic risk. One key to increasing retention may be bolstering resilience. In the current study, we argue that there is a communication imperative to study the processes through which academic resilience can be developed and maintained in order to implement targeted interventions.

Buzzanell and Houston (2018) discussed the importance of studying resilience as a communication process that is often integrated in everyday interactions and happens at multiple levels. In this study, this multilevel approach is applied in order to explore how students perceive the development of academic resilience over time at individual, relational, organizational, and community levels. Ultimately, these insights have the potential to highlight practical ways that educators and community members can help to communicatively and collectively foster resilience in students. Specifically, transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981, 1984, 1989) provided a useful framework to examine these insights and gain an understanding of how students engage communicative resilience-building over time.

## Communication Processes Through Transitions

Schlossberg (1981) proposed transition theory as a way to examine the continuous changes and transitions faced throughout one's lifetime, arguing that change resulting from transitions can influence relationship networks, an array of behaviors, and self-perceptions. Transitions occur when there is a change in assumptions, behaviors, and/or relationships, and these outcomes can be considered positive, negative, or both (Schlossberg, 1981). As students progress in their personal and academic lives, they likely experience a variety of transitions that affect their academic resilience and performance, and they utilize a range of communicative interactions and resources to manage or adapt to them. Individuals' responses to transitions are affected by a myriad of factors, including characteristics of the transition (e.g., duration), of the pre-transition and post-transition environments (e.g., interpersonal support systems), and of the individual (e.g., attitudes) (Schlossberg, 1981, 1984). In the current study, we utilize transition theory as a framework to examine characteristics of transitions through a turning point approach. This approach provides an opportunity to highlight individual, relational, and community levels of communicative processes involved in building academic resilience (Buzzanell & Houston, 2018).

To date, much of the resilience research focuses on the individual, with resilience presented as part of a larger umbrella of constructs (e.g., hope, efficacy) referred to as psychological capital (Luthans et al., 2012). General resilience is conceptualized as a trait-like (Li & Nishikawa, 2012), psychological variable, and is among the individual characteristics that influence how one responds to transitions (Schlossberg, 1981, 1984). For example, general resilience might include perceptions of competence, optimism, flexibility, and coping mechanisms one can employ when faced with adversity-inducing transitions (G. M. Wagnild & Collins, 2009). In particular, resilience manifests when a person can continue to function in a stable and effective way during times of distress, both psychologically and physiologically, as a result of many contextual, individual, and relational factors (Bonanno, 2005) and adaptations during transitions (Schlossberg, 1981, 1984). In the field of communication, T. D. Afifi (2018) articulated an important practical question: Why can some people demonstrate resilience when others cannot? We extend this question into the instructional realm in order to gain insight into problems of waning student

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resilience (Gray, 2015) and retention (NCES, 2017) by asking: When faced with adversity, why do some students persist and succeed academically, and others do not?

While investigations of academic resilience may provide useful insight in answer to this question, little research in instructional communication has considered this construct. Indeed, communication scholarship overall has been criticized for not keeping up with other disciplines in studying resilience (e.g., T. D. Afifi, 2018). The extant communication and resilience scholarship tend to focus on family contexts (e.g., Carr & Kellas, 2018) and community resilience in the wake of risk and crisis situations (e.g., Sellnow et al., 2017; Zhang & Shay, 2019). Thus, while we have some understanding of how resilience functions in select communication contexts, adversities in these non-academic settings are often treated as though they exist in a vacuum, separate from an individual's level of functioning in a higher education setting. The reality is that these non-academic contexts have the potential to influence students in academic realms, a consideration that instructional scholars are well-positioned to explore. Although related constructs have been examined in instructional communication literature (e.g., growth mindset in the basic communication course; Nordin & Broeckelman-Post, 2019, 2020), academic resilience has been relatively ignored in the instructional communication literature. Yet, the resilience that students build over time and in college has important implications for the coping strategies and individual resources students may transfer to situations outside of the classroom (e.g., health conditions, financial instability, job loss; T. Afifi et al., 2019; Beck, 2016). Thus, the development of academic resilience is a process that should be of interest to instructional communication researchers specifically and communication scholars more broadly.

## Academic Resilience

Unlike general resilience, academic resilience is more state-like and malleable, providing insight into how students manage day-to-day challenges, as well as how resilience develops and strengthens over time and through multiple transitions (Black & Ford-Gilboe, 2004; Egeland et al., 1993; Eisenberg et al., 2016). We argue that transitions themselves may not, on their own, develop students' resilience, but that the multilevel communication processes taking place during those transitions play an essential role in facilitating academic resilience. This resilience, in turn, is important to student well-being and success.

Low academic resilience can lead to feelings of hopelessness, anxiety, stress, and loneliness, as well as decreased enjoyment or affect toward school, morale, and academic self-esteem (Martin & Marsh, 2009; G. Wagnild, 2009). Further, academic resilience is often a predictor of communication and academic behavior in education such as active problem-solving and support seeking (Li, 2006). For example, Martin and Marsh (2009) found that academic resilience predicted desirable communication in the classroom (e.g., participation). Martin and Marsh also reported that self-efficacy, planning, control, anxiety, and commitment predicted academic resilience and that academic resilience predicted enjoyment of school and general self-esteem. In other words, academic resilience leads to desirable communication behaviors and positive outcomes for students in higher education.

However, there are two important gaps in the academic resilience literature that are relevant to the current study. First, although it is conceptualized as state-like and malleable, researchers have rarely studied the process of how resilience evolves over time, often only measuring it at one point in time (e.g., Egeland et al., 1993). Further, other scholars have measured indicators that may be related to resilience but are clearly different from resilience (e.g., morale, efficacy; G. Wagnild, 2009). In a forum on the

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future of instructional communication, Goldman and Myers (2017) emphasized the importance of “developmental processes that students experience in their education” which provides a “more holistic view of their development” (p. 485). Transition theory provides a useful framework for answering this call and examining not only current levels of academic resilience, specifically, but the events that trigger changes in resilience and the communicative processes that facilitate or inhibit it developmentally.

Second, less is known about the potential role that all levels of communication and collaboration, including individuals, relationships, and the larger university and community, play in the development of students’ academic resilience over time. Taken together, there is a need to explore resilience-building processes to develop practical suggestions for a multilevel approach to bolstering students’ academic resilience and outcomes.

### **Individual Resilience**

Related to resilience, scholars have identified psychological grit, and particularly the dimension of perseverance of effort (i.e., an individual’s tendency to keep working toward long-term goals, even in the face of challenges; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009), as a predictor of academic success. Perseverance of effort has been positively associated with college students’ behavioral and emotional engagement (Datu et al., 2015), self-efficacy and the perceived value of schoolwork, management of time and study environment, and the use of self-regulated learning strategies (Wolters & Hussain, 2015), academic adjustment, GPA, sense of belonging, college satisfaction, and intent to persist (i.e., continue enrollment) in college (Bowman et al., 2015). Related to grit is the idea of a growth mindset (Dixson et al., 2017). Individuals with a growth mindset believe that intelligence can be developed, as opposed to a fixed mindset, which maintains that intelligence is static (Dweck, 2000). Notably, these mindsets focus on the origin and evolution of individual abilities (e.g., intelligence), which contribute to resilience, but do not form the focus of this construct. Though conceptually similar to resilience, grit is presented as an individual characteristic that *facilitates* resilience. Specifically, Blalock et al. (2015) argued grit may make a person more resilient by (a) keeping long-term goals salient and increasing individuals’ motivation to address obstacles (i.e., individual level), and (b) motivating individuals to seek social support or resources following negative setbacks (i.e., relational level). While both grit and a growth mindset are characteristics that can bolster individual levels of resilience, an additional focus of the present study will be on the communicative processes through which students build and enact academic resilience. As Buzzanell and Houston (2018) stated, this is often accomplished collectively through relationships.

### **Relational Resilience**

Communication research demonstrates that interpersonal relationships and interactions are powerful in helping an individual respond to adversity (T. D. Afifi, 2018). Indeed, social support has been positively associated with students’ resilience and success; the supportive behaviors and messages individuals receive from others can help them navigate the challenges of college life. For example, family support has been identified as key to students’ academic motivation and appraisal of responses to academic adversity (Collie et al., 2016; Theiss, 2018). In another study of adolescent students who had dropped out and returned to school, Pan et al. (2017) concluded that instructors, especially those who were supportive of students, facilitated students’ resilience and related academic outcomes. Further, Lessard et al. (2014) found that meaningful connections with teachers and unwavering maternal support were often distinguishing factors between high school students who persisted and those who dropped out. Relatedly, Nazione et al. (2011) found that college students relied on memorable messages to help

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them navigate challenges; the most frequently reported of these challenges were academic in nature. Relationships, and especially those with instructors and advisors (Hunter & White, 2004), are important to students, as they are representatives of the university setting in which students are situated, highlighting the interrelatedness of multiple levels of influence, including relational and organizational levels.

### **Organizational and Community Resilience**

Support from both the institutional and community levels can help to bolster students’ academic resilience and persistence, though much of this research has focused on K–12 students. For example, Collie et al. (2016) found that students’ use of schools’ support services (i.e., academic support) and their perception of community support were crucial for positive academic outcomes, including motivation and academic buoyancy (i.e., the ability to manage everyday academic setbacks and challenges; Martin & Marsh, 2009). When comparing high school students who persisted and those who dropped out, Lessard et al. (2014) pointed out the importance of coordination at the organizational level (e.g., teachers, decision makers) to help students develop academic resilience. In the higher education context, Sidelinger et al. (2016) found that when students had positive relationships with instructors (i.e., representatives of the university), they were more likely to not only communicate with their instructor (i.e., relational), but also to make use of resources offered by the institution (i.e., organizational).

Taken together, because academic resilience is state-like and malleable, it is important for communication scholars to extend their understanding of the turning points that trigger changes in academic resilience over time and the multiple levels of communication processes (e.g., individual, relational, institutional) involved in these transitions. In particular, T. D. Afifi (2018) encouraged scholars to study the processes, and Houston and Buzzanell (2018) asserted that studying communication and stories with the multilevel approach could illuminate the collaborative components that build resilience. The goal of the present investigation was to apply these assertions to the context of academic resilience. Specifically, our study was designed to answer the following research question:

**RQ:** What individual, relational, organizational, and community communication processes do students perceive as instrumental to developing academic resilience over time?

## **Method**

In an attempt to interview students who ranged in academic experience and self-perceived academic resilience, we recruited students who were (a) enrolled in a required general education basic communication course, (b) enrolled in a remedial course for students who have been conditionally admitted to the university, and (c) upper-level students from a research subjects pool. Given that all first-year students are required to take the basic communication course at the university in which the research was conducted, we reasoned that all levels of resilience would be represented in this broad population. Further, students in remedial courses are often underrepresented, first generation, or transfer students who often have less efficacy, more anxiety, and less motivation, which are all correlated with resilience (Cappella & Weinstein, 2001; Howell, 2016; Martin & Marsh, 2009), which we reasoned would enhance the diversity of our student sample. Finally, in an effort to reach students at various levels of their educational journey, upper-level students were recruited via a research participation system. All students received the researchers’ contact information and emailed the researchers to schedule a 1-hour interview, for which they received either required research credits or a \$25 Amazon gift card paid for

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with a small research grant.

## Participants

Participants ( $N = 23$ ) included males ( $n = 11$ ) and females ( $n = 12$ ) who ranged in age from 18 to 23 ( $M = 19.34$ ,  $SD = 1.61$ ). The sample included six first-generation and five transfer students. Participants were primarily first-year students ( $n = 14$ ), with two sophomores, three juniors, and two seniors. Approximately half of the sample was White ( $n = 12$ ), and the remaining half included five Black/African American, one Asian, one Hispanic, and four students who described themselves as Mixed. There were 14 different majors represented in the sample, with self-reported GPAs ranging from 2.5 to 4.2 ( $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = .45$ ).

## Procedures

We collected data using in-depth retrospective interview techniques (RIT) to retroactively examine changes over time (Huston et al., 1981). Specifically, we employed a turning points approach—a guided interview process that asks participants to recall, and graph, particular points of change in a dependent variable on a timeline. Participants treated academic resilience as the dependent variable associated with each turning point as they graphed it on the y-axis.

Some participants ( $n = 15$ ) reported to a private research lab and met with the researcher(s) and others ( $n = 8$ ) completed virtual interviews through Zoom. In both interview formats, we first explained the study and allowed students time to review the informed consent document. Second, after providing a definition of academic resilience for them, students were given detailed directions about constructing turning point graphs, shown a sample graph, and asked to complete their own. They were encouraged to include as many events as came to mind and to include both positive and negative changes in academic resilience. The students graphed a total of 151 turning points, reporting between 4 and 12 ( $M = 7.63$ ,  $SD = 2.06$ ) turning points each. Next, the students wrote a brief descriptor of each event, indicated when the event occurred, and then rated their academic resilience at that point in time. Similar to past turning points research where students indicated the change in a dependent variable (e.g., 0 [*not likely to persist*] to 100 [*completely likely to persist*]; T. R. Wang, 2014), our participants graphed their turning points on a scale ranging from 0% (*not at all resilient*) to 100% (*completely resilient*) resilient. Next, students answered probing questions about each turning point to elucidate the factors that changed their resilience (e.g., Who was present? What did they say? What did you do? How were your academics affected?). Last, students were asked some general questions regarding academic resilience (e.g., advice they would give to other students, what they would like faculty members to know).

## Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed using a professional transcription service, resulting in 204 single-spaced pages of data. The data were analyzed using a combination of inductive and theory-driven analyses (Boyatzis, 1988). First, one author independently read 15 transcripts, using open and inductive coding to develop a thematic codebook for student-described strategies influencing academic resilience. Using that codebook, both authors coded 30% ( $n = 7$ ) of the transcripts, achieving acceptable reliability (Scott's  $\pi = .83$ ). The remaining interviews were evenly split between the authors to complete coding. Second, the authors moved to a deductive and theory-driven approach to data organization (Boyatzis, 1988). Specifically, based on the existing framework of resilience at the individual, relational, organizational, and community level, we organized each emergent strategy or theme into one of the extant levels.

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Although organizational and community levels have been treated as distinct in prior research, our participants treated them synonymously, referring to the campus, organizational, or institutional community. Thus, organizational and community levels were collapsed and will hereafter be referred to as university community. Consequently, we have resilience-building strategies in three levels (i.e., individual, relational, and university community). The codebook was applied to the remaining eight interviews, with no new strategies emerging, suggesting theoretical saturation (Bowen, 2008). See Table 1 for the three levels of resilience, specific strategies, and descriptions.

## Results

The thematic analysis revealed that all 23 interviewees addressed resilience-building strategies that could be implemented at the individual, relational, and university community level. Within each level, students identified four resilience-building strategies. At the individual level of communication processes, developing a resilient mindset emerged most frequently ( $n = 145$ ), followed by developing academic strategies ( $n = 71$ ), compartmentalization ( $n = 25$ ), and self-care ( $n = 21$ ). Relational-level communication processes included emotional support and empathy most frequently ( $n = 92$ ), followed by positive teacher behaviors ( $n = 68$ ), academic assistance ( $n = 57$ ), and role models ( $n = 15$ ). Finally, themes in the university community-level communication processes included developing support networks ( $n = 19$ ), better promotion of university services ( $n = 13$ ), a need to normalize a lack of resilience ( $n = 7$ ), and a need to directly address threats to resilience ( $n = 3$ ).

### Individual Level Communication Processes

Students described developing a resilient mindset as finding your passion, focusing on the future, being responsible, and seeking challenges. For example, Joy described this mindset, stating, “Just think about the things that motivate you a lot. Keeping that in your mind so that you can have a goal you’re always striving for.” Some participants found mindset to be implicit in the term “academic resilience” itself, with Barrett sharing,

When you hear the word resilience, you think tough, and grueling, and that it’s going to be a lot of work. While that can be true in a lot of cases, I think academic resilience, especially on a personal level, is a lot more to do with inspiration and passion.

Part of the resilient mindset also came from experiencing and surviving challenges, as Alex described, “Everything that I’ve said I couldn’t do, I could do. I put myself down a little bit, but after something good happened, I knew I can do the next thing good [*sic*].”

Other students described specific academic strategies that they were responsible for developing and using at an individual level. For example, Lindsey discussed strategies that she believed helped her to cultivate high academic resilience: “I keep a planner. I put everything down. Usually, after a lecture or a class, I go through my notes every day, just to refresh myself.” Echoing similar strategies, Cody said, “do the reading . . . actually take notes and study more.” Callie also talked about how she built up her resilience: “I worked hard second semester. I’d studied a lot more. I made flash cards and stuff and would review a lot after my classes.”

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<b>TABLE 1</b>		
<b>Multilevel Approaches to Resilience-Building</b>		
<b>Theme</b>	<b>Description/Examples</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<b>INDIVIDUAL LEVEL</b>		
Develop a Resilient Mindset	Making cognitive shifts to facilitate resilience (e.g., find your passion, focus on the future, seek challenges, be responsible)	145
Develop Academic Strategies	Adopting or adapting individual behaviors to promote resilience and academic success (e.g., don't procrastinate, structure your study environment, do the work)	71
Utilize Compartmentalization	Cognitively or physically separating academic and non-academic foci to minimize the influence of external factors on academic performance (e.g., withdraw from negative situations, mentally separate personal and academic issues)	25
Engage in Self-Care	Enacting self-care strategies to address specific threats to resilience and academic performance or enhance resilience through general well-being (e.g., find balance, engage in healthy behavior, take care of mental health)	21
<b>RELATIONAL LEVEL</b>		
Emotional Support and Empathy	Seeking or receiving messages of comfort and support focused on emotional and/or mental well-being (e.g., support network that will listen, empathize, offer emotional support—can include teachers, peers, friends, and family)	92
Positive Teaching Behaviors	Effective behaviors that are related to positive student outcomes (e.g., immediate, caring, and motivating, responsive)	68
Academic Assistance	Utilizing informational and academic resources through collaboration or interaction with others (e.g., teachers and advisors offer extra help or resources, tutoring services, provide useful critique or feedback, academic study groups)	57
Find a Role Model	Actively identifying someone to emulate in order to achieve academic success and demonstrate resilience (e.g., find someone who demonstrates positive behaviors, goals, and attitudes)	15
<b>CAMPUS COMMUNITY LEVEL</b>		
Help Students Develop Support Network	Institutional efforts to provide welcoming and accepting opportunities to build relationships with instructors, between peers, and connections with groups (e.g., Living Learning Programs, student organizations, organized social events)	19
Promote Campus Resources	Institutional efforts to provide and promote both academic and non-academic support and resources for students (e.g., counseling, tutoring, financial aid)	13
Normalize Struggles	Institutional efforts to destigmatize failure, normalize threats to academic resilience, and respond to adversity (e.g., hear from others that this is normal, discuss lows and highs, validate emotional struggles)	7
Address Specific Challenges to Resilience	Institutional responses to problematic student behaviors that affect the university's academic culture and individual student performance (e.g., alcohol abuse, partying)	3



Students acknowledged that their lives were comprised of many different facets and in order to maintain academic resilience, they had to compartmentalize academics. In one example, Rick said, “I’ve never had any problems shutting out the social aspect in order to focus on school.” Douglas described a “mental divide” that allows him to distance himself from work when he is not working, which helps reduce stress and boost resilience. Renee also used compartmentalization in the advice she offered to others:

I would just try to be like, ‘Remove yourself from this situation. That’s not your life. Your life isn’t one single thing that’s happening. There are multiple things you need to have responsibility for.’ I just wish I could have helped myself separate the events going on in my life.

Finally, students also recognized that to be resilient it was incumbent on them as individuals to engage in self-care. This category included remarks about balance, awareness and treatment of mental and physical health, and general healthy behaviors. Put simply, Heather said, “Take care of yourself.” Extending on this idea, Brianna said, “You can’t have resilience if you don’t care about yourself.” For example, Lindsey described taking some time off to mentally refocus after being unhappy and struggling in her major,

I was at a school I was not happy with. I was a business major, which is not my mind at all. I decided then and there I needed to take some time off. I took about two years to help bring that back up and get my mind back into being in school.

For a more habitual strategy, Rachel described how she “started meditating because it just gave me a nice quiet place to just stop thinking about everything.”

## **Relational Level Communication Processes**

Themes that emerged as representative of relational resilience involved strategies that a student cannot implement on their own. Rather, another person (e.g., friend, family member, instructor, advisor) was an integral part of the resilience-building process.

First, students reported that *emotional support and empathy* were important strategies for building resilience. The students’ descriptions of their general support networks showed listening, validation, and empathetic behaviors were helpful to them when they felt low in academic resilience. One participant described how the emotional support and intervention of others allowed him to ultimately regain his resilience and motivation in the classroom:

At that time, I was very, very close to suicide and I told that person. He told the counselor and that counselor pulled me into their office and called my parents . . . From there on, I got treated.

Another student described challenges at home and how two teachers noticed:

. . . as they started talking to me telling me it was OK, this is a safe outlet, they are not going to tell anybody unless they absolutely have to, then I broke it down and told them everything that was going on. They were a comfort zone that I needed.

Heather discussed two important relationships for her academic resilience during a major life transition: “I felt like even though I had switched to a new school, they had made me feel included.”

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Students also described the role of instructors demonstrating *positive teaching behaviors* that helped them develop resilience, discussing behaviors illustrative of being immediate and approachable, giving constructive feedback, being engaging, and other desirable instructional behaviors (e.g., Nussbaum, 1992). Students, like Heather, often acknowledged that they knew this was difficult:

I understand that professors have hundreds of students, but I feel like sometimes, for me, if you see me struggling, talk to me after class. Let me know that you know I'm struggling and you're willing to help me to overcome.

More generally, Jessica suggested that teachers “should really try to interact with us and get to know us. That would help a lot.” Luther highlighted the importance of instructor enthusiasm, stating, “If you find somebody who is actually really interested in what they're doing, and what they're teaching . . . that definitely helps.” A common thread in the effective teaching behavior stories included empathy and approachability, as stated by Cody:

I think they need to recognize that every student wants to do well. I don't think there's any student that doesn't want to do well. They just need to be approachable so that students can feel comfortable asking them questions.

This approachability provided opportunities for students to seek *academic assistance* and to bolster their academic resilience. Students, like Louis, appreciated teachers who “were more focused on you understanding what needs to be understood” than on tests and assignments. Students identified academic assistance as a type of informational support. This academic assistance might come in the form of advice, tutoring, or study groups and came from a variety of sources. For example, Derek described how involving himself in academic assistance opportunities on campus helped his resilience, “I go to a lot of study groups to make sure my grades are on par so I don't fall by the wayside.” Academic assistance could also come from parents. Joy described academic assistance from her parents as they helped with “getting applications ready.” In some cases, academic assistance was also paired with emotional support. Rick said, “If we notice that someone within the class group or just our friend who needs help with a certain class, or if I do, someone reaches out and that's when the group comes together.”

Finally, students reported finding a *role model* who helped to guide their attitudes, motivations, behaviors, and consequently, their resilience. Some, like Stacy, developed this habit early on: “I remember being very young, always looking to emulate someone that seemed perfect.” In a more in-depth example, Derek witnessed his mother being resilient and considered her a role model in his life:

It would be times at night where she would go to sleep without eating dinner just to make sure me and my sister ate. That right there, seeing that gave me something to base my hard work off of because I'm like, “Well, if she can do that, I can do it too.” There's no reason for me to be sitting around not doing anything. You know what I mean? That's definitely where it [his own resilience] comes from.

## University Community Level Communication Processes

Students wanted universities to help them develop *support networks*. Many students acknowledged that the university already did a good job of providing organizations where students could find a sense of connection. Cody highlighted a living learning program (LLP) as an important support network: “I'm

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in LLP, so I’m surrounded by academia a bit more. I feel more motivated to study, because I’m living at my school.” However, others thought that campus groups may not be genuinely welcoming. Brianna explained, “I don’t know. More like a welcoming community . . . Everybody is nice, but I feel like they’re not welcoming. They just say hi and bye. They’re not like, ‘Come join this,’ or, ‘Come do this.’”

Additionally, although students believed the university already provided ample resources to assist with academic resilience, they believed that universities should do a better job promoting them. Heather said,

I feel there should be counseling a little bit. I know they offer that, but it’s more like you got to make a point of it. Make it known. I feel like it’s known, but I don’t feel like it’s known.

Douglas reiterated this point, recognizing the limited abilities of the university in encouraging students to utilize available resources:

The problem is that [the university] does a lot of stuff for me that I just don’t care about, that I don’t realize that they’re doing. The problem also is that they can’t really do anything about that. I know that the college has a bunch of resources I’ll never utilize.

Students also described a need for the *normalization* of a lack of academic resilience by the larger university community. As explained by Barrett, “I think the community should be approaching it from a little more of an emotion aspect where it’s like, validate people in saying their struggles are normal.” Similarly, Rick explained,

A lot of the people are struggling with the same kinds of things even if they don’t see it or show it to their friends. Everyone struggles at some point. Everyone just needs to recognize that and understand that . . . recognize the signs that you tried to hide but couldn’t condemn and then help them work through those problems.

Finally, students generally did not think that the university was successful at addressing some *specific threats* to academic resilience. In particular, students called out a culture of partying and alcohol abuse. Brianna detailed this concern:

They should take care of drinking more. They have two stretchers already in [the residence hall] because they’re drinking and partying a lot. They need to know their priorities. I feel like, sometimes the campus doesn’t care about that because the frat parties at every house in campus, they drink. They [the university administration] need to have more control with that.

## Discussion

This study examined communicative processes at individual, relational, and university community levels that may influence students’ academic resilience over time, and consequently, their persistence to graduate. Our findings suggest that while academic resilience has often been conceptualized at the individual level, there are also important developmental opportunities at the relational and university community levels. Of particular note, results revealed that only one relational-level theme occurred within the classroom: *positive teaching behaviors*; all other themes demonstrated that the development of resilience happens outside of the traditional classroom yet affects what happens inside the classroom. This finding highlights the need for instructional communication scholars to take a more holistic,

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multilevel approach to the way that we study and discuss influences on student learning and success. While most instructional research focuses exclusively on the impact of instructor messages and behaviors or instructor-student relationships on student outcomes such as motivation, affect, and learning, the current study demonstrates the wealth of influences affecting our students and their academic persistence and performance. As such, the following discussion will focus not only on practical implications of these results, but also on opportunities for instructional scholars to expand their research questions beyond the classroom—doing so will allow us to consider communicative processes across multiple levels as we endeavor to bolster students’ academic resilience and success.

Consistent with previous research that conceptualized academic resilience as an individual variable (Li & Nishikawa, 2012), students emphasized what they had done, and should do, to develop academic resilience as an individual. In particular, students’ narratives focused on developing a resilient mindset through finding and pursuing their passion and a focus on short- and long-term goals, as well as making conscious choices to challenge themselves. These themes are consistent with conceptualizations of grit and a growth mindset, supporting the role of these individual characteristics in enacting academic resilience. However, connections with others also exerted a powerful influence on academic resilience. Supportive communication was critical in two forms: informational support (i.e., academic assistance) and emotional support. Students often sought membership in social groups to meet these needs, which had the potential to positively and negatively influence academic resilience.

Students identified a university community that helped facilitate peer connections as integral to their academic resilience. Indeed, the strategies that universities would expect to be effective are being recognized as valuable by students (e.g., Living and Learning communities, tutoring, counseling). However, students also offered insight into what universities can improve (e.g., increasing awareness of these resources). Taken together, the results of this study provide a foundation for several practical implications that can inform campus-level approaches to academic resilience. With students’ declining academic resilience (Gray, 2015), it is critical that a three-pronged, interdependent approach be employed to address the problem. Individual, relational, and university community levels of resilience-building all have the potential to be integrated into training, programming, and curricular opportunities at higher education institutions.

## **Practical Implications**

### ***Instructional Training***

Although graduate teaching assistants and instructors receive training in some disciplines, Robinson and Hope (2013) found that approximately 80% of faculty members had never received teacher training. Student narratives in the present study suggest such training should focus on prioritizing behaviors which can signal approachability, engagement, and empathy for students to enhance academic resilience. For example, instructors should be trained to be perceived as emotionally supportive of students through immediacy, clarity, and communication competence (Titsworth et al., 2013). Further, the examination of the turning points that students navigate during high school and college may serve as an illuminating and empathy building exercise for instructors.

### ***Campus Resource Referrals***

Our participants believed helpful campus resources were provided and that they were given adequate opportunities to develop support networks. However, they did not believe campus resources were as

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effective as they could be or reached the students who need them. Instructors interact with students regularly and may be the first line of defense in terms of recognizing when students need referrals to the appropriate people or offices on campus (e.g., tutoring, counseling center, food pantry). Even in instances where instructors or advisors may not be equipped to deal with the negative event a student is experiencing, substantive training and a positive relationship with students may allow an instructor to connect them with needed resources (Petress, 1996; Sidelinger et al., 2016).

### ***Foster a Resilient Mindset***

Academic resilience was strengthened when students discovered their passion, whether through an extracurricular experience or a particular class. This passion helped students think beyond the short-term obligation of passing classes and prompted them to plan for a future that excited them. Exposing students to experiences with which they might not initially be familiar is an important point of a liberal arts education and general education requirements (Hanstedt, 2012). At the institutional level, encouraging students to explore different academic areas might help them find their passion while providing them a sense of agency over their coursework. Within the classroom, simply providing flexibility in assignment or topic choices allows students to tailor their work to their own interests and goals and can help motivate them (Goldman & Brann, 2016). Relatedly, helping students see the “bigger picture” as a guide in setting both short- and long-term goals seems beneficial for building academic resilience. Wolters and Hussain (2015) point out that instructors should encourage students to view learning, and ultimately graduation, as significant personal accomplishments. At the campus community level, maintaining active campus career centers to help students discover meaning, increase their confidence, and enhance their ability to achieve goals (Thompson & Feldman, 2010) would help foster individual resilience.

### ***Normalize Academic Assistance***

An important aspect of encouraging students to be resilient comes in the form of normalizing struggles. Students talked about how important it was for them to realize that they were not the only ones who experienced decreases in academic resilience, and that it would be helpful for those struggles to be normalized. This might reduce the stigma of seeking assistance; in other words, seeking help when one needs it is a normal part of the learning process. Instructors and advisors can help to normalize the fluid nature of academic resilience by engaging in self-disclosure about their own experiences or challenges they may have faced during transitions (Eisenberg et al., 2016). Disclosures and the normalization of struggles may help students to develop academic strategies consistent with self-regulated learning (Pintrich, 2004). Demonstrating and providing resources for these learning behaviors might be helpful for those who are struggling to keep up with their academic workload.

### ***Encourage Students to Utilize Support Networks***

Consistent with previous resilience, retention, and transition theory research (T. D. Afifi, 2018; Schlossberg, 1981; Theiss, 2018; Tinto, 1987), multiple themes highlighting the importance of support and communal coping to build resilience emerged. This support can come from intimate relationships, families, peers, and institutions and communities (Eisenberg et al., 2016), all of which were mentioned by interviewees. Our results suggest that academic resilience may be associated with interpersonal communication skills for building support networks. Participants identified both academic and social/emotional support as communicative resources that bolstered their academic resilience and discussed positive changes in academic resilience when they surrounded themselves with like-minded and motivated friend networks. Because social groups provide a source of friendship, social support, and

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even peer learning (e.g., Ackermann & Morrow, 2007), the students who find a positive social group may be at an advantage.

### ***Build an Inclusive Community***

Some participants described the college community as welcoming and inclusive. Others, however, identified weaknesses in the campus community and feelings of isolation that were detrimental to their academic resilience. These narratives highlighted the importance of building an inclusive community at every level of higher education, both interpersonally and organizationally, to foster academic resilience. Incorporating additional opportunities and spaces for students to interact with their professors is one way that institutions can help foster these connections (Selingo, 2018). Several participants talked about student organizations that were positive ways to get involved, develop peer support networks, and feel a connection with the campus community. However, others said that they did not think they were always marketed well. Promoting these organizations and any of their sponsored events would help students identify groups they might be interested in joining.

### ***Encourage Self-Care***

Although engaging in self-care (e.g., physical activity, adequate sleep) has been associated with student success, performance, and retention (Eisenberg et al., 2016; Moses et al., 2016), traditional college students do not typically engage in sufficient self-care (Hermon & Davis, 2004). Educators should provide self-care education in college settings based on the strategies that students identified here. For example, it is possible that compartmentalization, or the organization of positive and negative thoughts and events into separate categories (Showers, 1992), may better allow students to engage in self-care. If students can successfully compartmentalize negative turning points and life events, then they may be able to continue effective academic functioning in transitions. Further, instructors can encourage students to engage in self-care and compartmentalization by modeling the importance of work-life balance and providing self-care activities or resources for students as part of a course. At the university level, providing well-promoted resources and workshops that focus on student self-care is an important supplement to academic and social resources provided by the instructor.

Our participants emphasized that they want instructors to acknowledge and empathize with the often-overwhelming range of life experiences and responsibilities they are managing. The necessity of validating students' lives and experiences outside the narrow scope of our classrooms is highlighted when we look at the changing population of students in our classrooms. For example, reports have identified 52% of students are now first generation, 51% are low to moderate income, 44% are over the age of 24, 28% are taking care of children or other dependents, 26% are working full-time jobs, and 18% are non-native English speakers (Miller et al., 2014). Some students are unable to meet basic needs, with 36% of all students (57% of Black students and 56% of first-generation students) experiencing housing and food insecurity, which affects their ability to perform and persist academically (Dubick et al., 2016). Communicating to students that we recognize them as individuals with full and complicated lives is a powerful way to validate their experiences and empathize with them, thereby enhancing academic resilience.

### **Research Implications**

Taken together, our study provides several novel contributions to the study of academic resilience from an instructional communication lens. Most notably, this study supports the need for a multiple pronged

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approach to academic resilience to support more effective student outcomes. Students experience a myriad of events over the course of their academic careers that influence their academic resilience and approach to learning and education. That so much of resilience-building happens outside of the classroom suggests that instructional scholars have an opportunity to supplement our knowledge of effective in-class instructor communication by focusing on students’ holistic wellness. For example, instructional scholars may shift their focus to institutional-level messaging and campaigns, analysis of students’ social and academic support networks and peer influence, and non-instructional messages focused on inclusiveness, empathy, and support for a deeper understanding of the influence on learning and retention. With this expansion of research foci come exciting opportunities for scholarly collaboration with researchers in interpersonal, organizational, risk and crisis, and health communication. The current investigation reinforces scholars’ recent discussions of the vital importance of external influences on students’ ability to focus and succeed academically (e.g., student precarity; LaBelle, 2020; Wright et al., 2020).

Theoretically and methodologically, the use of transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981, 1984) and the turning point approach proved useful for conceptualizing and investigating developmental processes and their impact on students’ academic resilience. Many researchers view resilience as a developmental process (Egeland et al., 1993; Eisenberg et al., 2016) in which the strategies developed may transcend context and life stage. That is, the resilience developed in higher educational contexts, whether at the individual, relational, or community level, will provide strategies and network resources in students’ coping arsenal to deal with adversity in family, work, social, economic, risk and crisis, or political situations beyond graduation. Conversely, our results support that adversities and transitions outside of the classroom also influence what happens inside the classroom. These results are consistent with transition theory, which maintains that individuals continue to adapt throughout their lifespan in response to transitions that can alter their perception of the self and the world (Schlossberg, 1981, 1984). Applying this theoretical framework and/or methodology in instructional communication can provide a practical means of addressing the need for additional understanding of developmental processes in instructional research (Goldman & Myers, 2017).

## **Limitations and Future Directions**

Although this study applied a novel theoretical, methodological, and multilevel approach to studying academic resilience, it is limited. One limitation is that these students were already persisting, or had returned to college after an initial dropout, indicating that this may be an inherently more resilient group. Lessard et al. (2014) suggested that many aspects of developing resilience are consistent across contexts and populations, such as asking for help when it is needed, establishing positive relationships, and engaging in effective planning. Future research should examine the resilience pathways of students who have not been admitted to college or who have already dropped out of college.

Additionally, a second round of data collection to increase our sample diversity and reach theoretical saturation was interrupted by COVID-19, leading to a different method of data collection for the researchers as well as a potentially stressful situation presenting a challenge to academic resilience for students. Surprisingly, however, the participants who were interviewed during the shift to online learning due to the pandemic did not mention this as a turning point.

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Consistent with T. D. Afifi’s description of the resilience construct as “elusive” (2018, p. 5), some participants conflated academic resilience with other constructs, including passion, grit, and motivation, even after a formal definition was provided. Future research should continue to improve conceptualization, and measurement, of academic resilience. More practically, the current research also identified multiple processes that contribute to more resilient pathways. Future research should utilize longitudinal research and turning points to examine how an understanding of the development of resilience may positively enhance students’ academic experiences and their capacity for resilience beyond academic life including risk, crisis, family, financial, and other adversities they may face. Finally, in settings where additional teacher training or campus community-level programming is implemented, sound assessment plans should be integral to assess the influence of programming on academic resilience.

## Conclusion

Academic resilience, and particularly its relationship with retention and graduation, is an important focus for higher education institutions. Student narratives of their academic resilience over time provide insight into the individual, relational, and organizational levels of academic resilience. Furthermore, these narratives highlight important communicative processes involved with academic resilience. Taken together, understanding students’ resilience, in their own words, reveals several ways in which faculty members, staff, and administrators can help foster resilience and encourage academic persistence and success, as well as future opportunities for instructional communication scholars to collaboratively address students’ academic resilience and outcomes, within and beyond the classroom.

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