

**RESILIENT BEHAVIORS OF HIGH-ACHIEVING STUDENTS
IN THEIR FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE**

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This phenomenological study explores how high-achieving students experience resiliency in their first year of college. In order to meet the needs of high-achieving college students, educators need specific recommendations on how to best advise and promote resiliency in their first year of college. The purpose of this study is to provide greater insight for higher education professionals as they work to develop quality programs and resources for high-achieving students. The three research questions that guided this study were: How do high-achieving college students describe stressful experiences in their first year of college? How do high-achieving college students describe coping with stressful experiences in their first year of college? How do high-achieving students describe their learning from stressful experiences in their first year of college? Through individual interviews with 10 sophomores and juniors, students described how they experienced stressful and challenging situations, how they coped with those situations, and what they learned from going through those experiences. Participants revealed dealing with many challenging academic and social experiences during their first year to which they applied both independent and dependent coping strategies. Students revealed that learning from those challenges was an important part of their experience and helped them to be more prepared for future challenges. As a result of this study, recommendations for educators

who work with high-achieving students include first, dispelling the myth that high-achieving students do not experience stress or challenges in their first year, secondly, promoting an individualized approach to advising high-achieving students, and lastly, the creating opportunities for students to share stories of resilience. Educators can use these findings as a guide to help high-achieving students succeed academically and socially in their first year of college.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	XII
1.0 INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE.....	1
1.1 PROBLEM AREA.....	1
1.2 INQUIRY SETTING.....	4
1.3 STAKEHOLDERS	6
1.4 PROBLEM OF PRACTICE.....	8
2.0 REVIEW OF SUPPORTING SCHOLARSHIP.....	10
2.1 RESILIENCY IS A COMPLEX CONCEPT TO DEFINE.....	11
2.1.1 Interpretations of resiliency.....	11
2.1.2 Resiliency as both a process and a characteristic	12
2.2 FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE RESILIENCY	14
2.2.1 Internal and external factors	15
2.2.2 Academic, social, and emotional preparedness.....	16
2.2.3 Health and wellness	17
2.3 INSTITUTIONAL INTERVENTIONS.....	19
2.3.1 Relationships	19
2.3.2 Teaching resilient behaviors.....	20
2.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	22

3.0	METHODS	24
3.1	RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	25
3.2	HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGY RESEARCH DESIGN.....	27
3.3	PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION	30
3.4	PARTICIPANTS	32
3.5	INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD	33
3.6	DATA COLLECTION.....	34
3.7	DATA ANALYSIS.....	35
3.8	TRUSTWORTHINESS.....	36
3.9	CONFIDENTIALITY	37
3.10	METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	38
4.0	FINDINGS	39
4.1	CHAPTER INTRODUCTION.....	39
4.2	HOW HIGH-ACHIEVING STUDENTS DESCRIBE STRESSFUL EXPERIENCES.....	40
	4.2.1 Academic challenges.....	41
	4.2.1.1 Assumptions about college and one’s own abilities.....	42
	4.2.1.2 Reactions to academic challenges and feelings of disbelief.	44
	4.2.1.3 Vivid recollections.....	47
	4.2.1.4 Variation in academic experiences	48
	4.2.2 Finding and maintaining social networks	50
	4.2.2.1 Social skills and personalities.....	51
	4.2.2.2 Social expectations	52

4.2.2.3	Taking risks in order to be accepted	54
4.2.2.4	Personal circumstances influence social connections	55
4.2.2.5	Similar interests and identities promote early connections	57
4.2.2.6	Finding the <i>right</i> friends.....	58
4.2.3	Making decisions about academic plans of study	60
4.2.3.1	Process of choosing an academic plan of study	61
4.2.3.2	Stigma of being undeclared	62
4.2.4	Health issues.....	63
4.2.4.1	Mental health.....	64
4.2.4.2	Connection between mental and physical health	67
4.2.4.3	Physical health.....	68
4.2.5	Pressure to achieve and managing expectations.....	69
4.2.5.1	Pressure to excel academically.....	70
4.2.5.2	Pressure to succeed socially.....	72
4.2.6	How students describe coping with stressful experiences	73
4.2.6.1	Independent Coping Strategies.....	75
4.2.6.2	Positive resilient self-talk.....	80
	<i>Resilient self-talk for reassurance</i>	81
	<i>Resilient self-talk as a reminder</i>	82
	<i>Resilient self-talk for motivation or encouragement to act</i>	83
4.2.6.3	Dependent Coping Strategies.....	84
4.3	HOW STUDENTS DESCRIBE LEARNING FROM STRESSFUL EXPERIENCES.....	86

4.3.1	Personal reflection and growth	87
4.3.2	Some stress is ok and can lead to positive outcomes	88
4.3.3	Realization that challenging times are still ahead	89
4.3.4	Power of sharing stories	91
4.3.5	Awareness of experience in comparison to others	93
4.4	RESILIENCY AND FAILURE.....	96
4.4.1	Defining resiliency	97
4.4.2	Failure.....	99
4.4.3	Using “resilient” as a personal descriptor	101
5.0	CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS	103
5.1	CONCLUSIONS OF KEY FINDINGS	103
5.1.1	High-achieving students experience a variety of stressful experiences ..	103
5.1.2	Coping with stressful experiences	106
5.1.3	Learning from stressful experiences	107
5.2	IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE.....	108
5.2.1	Dispel the myth that high-achieving students do not experience stress of challenges	109
5.2.2	Apply an individualized approach to advising high-achieving students	110
5.2.3	Create opportunities to share stories of resilience and teach resilient behaviors	112
5.2.4	Implications for my practice.....	113
5.3	LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH	115
5.4	DEMONSTRATION OF PRACTICE.....	117

5.5 CONCLUSION	119
APPENDIX A	120
APPENDIX B	121
APPENDIX C	123
APPENDIX D	124
APPENDIX E	129
APPENDIX F	130
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	131

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Sample Demographics	33
Table 2. Independent Coping Strategies	76
Table 3. Dependent Coping Strategies.....	85
Table 4. Definitions of Resiliency	98

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1.0 INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

1.1 PROBLEM AREA

In their first year of college, students engage with many developmental tasks in order to function both socially and academically (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The first year of college can be a particularly challenging time for new students (Bundy & Paul, 2003). In the absence of daily structured activity that may have been provided in high school, students need to navigate the development of new relationships and management of their own time (Bundy & Paul, 2003). Though evidence suggests that students who are engaged in learning, connected to others, and have a positive view of life are more likely to have better grades and a higher quality learning experience in college (Schreiner, 2010), this is not the experience of all first year students.

Given the same resources and support, it is possible that two students will function very differently in similar institutional environments (Schreiner, 2010). Some students face challenges in their first year and struggle to cope while others facing similar challenges are able to thrive both academically and socially. Researchers refer to this phenomenon of overcoming or coping with challenges as *resiliency* (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Ideally, first-year students meet the developmental challenges of establishing new peer networks, maintaining relationships with family and friends, solving problems independently, and accomplishing their academic or professional goals within the time that they spend at a university. However, the

reality is that the stress that is generated by the transition to college, when mixed with inadequate social and emotional coping skills (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003), can lead to emotional and mental distress as well and have a negative impact on a student's ability to be resilient (i.e. the individual's ability to persist despite the obstacles they face).

The process of being engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally in the college experience is referred to as *thriving* (Schreiner, 2010). Institutions of higher education are invested in the success of their students and devote many resources toward retention efforts, academic assistance, and counseling services toward helping their students to thrive (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). However, when students struggle as they face challenges, their resiliency is tested. There is evidence to suggest that the present population of students struggles with being emotionally unprepared for the stress of college life (Harris Poll, 2015). This can especially be a problem for high-achieving students who can be identified as earning higher than average standardized test scores, higher than average grade point average (GPA), being enrolled in an honors program, or engaging in co-curricular activities (Shiroma, 2014).

Students considered to be high-achieving are also sometimes referred to as "talented" or "high ability" (Dougherty, 2007). Although definitions of this identity vary, these words are typically used to describe students who demonstrate above average academic ability. For college students, these terms can describe either those who perform well in high school and are recognized for their potential as well as those who perform well after they enroll in college (Gordon, 1992).

Robinson (1997) refers to high-achieving students as the top two to five percent at a given college (p. 219), but distinguishes that this range might vary from institution to institution. It is possible that an individual's profile of ability may vary in that some can be talented in one

area and not in others (Robinson, 1997). Additionally, the context of the specific peer group is a factor in that a student who might be identified as high-achieving at one institution may not be considered to be high-achieving at another depending on the student body profile at a particular institution. For the purposes of this research study, high-achieving students will be defined as students who demonstrate an above average performance in academics (3.5 GPA or higher) and involvement (such as demonstrating leadership and engagement) in college.

There is often an expectation that students who are considered to be “high-achieving” will excel in a college environment by successfully meeting the challenges that they face. High-achieving students tend to be more motivated than their low-achieving counterparts (Albaili, 1997) and may experience a desire for perfectionism (Stoeber, Kempe, & Keogh, 2008). However, educators should not assume that high-achieving students will automatically perform well in a college environment. Balduf (2009) conducted a study of first-year high-achieving students at Queen Mary College who earned low grades and therefore received academic warnings or were put on academic probation. Queen Mary College is among the nations’ top 50 small public schools where the freshman class has an average high school GPA of 4.0, SAT scores of 1240-1440, and ACT composite scores of 28-32. The students who were the focus of the study were academically high-achieving students in high school, however, their academic success did not continue into their first year of college. The participants in this study reported that they did not necessarily need to expend much effort in order to achieve A grades and academic success in high school. In college, however, when faced with challenging coursework, these students were unprepared and unable to navigate through this hardship due to lack of appropriate study skills, time management, and motivation, resulting in D and F grades. The participants indicated a need to improve their own attitudes and behaviors in order to combat

underachievement (Balduf, 2009). This need to set extremely high standards and perform perfectly can result in shame, embarrassment, and guilt when perfection is not achieved (Stoeber & Yang, 2010). Additionally, Gerrity, Lawrence, and Sedlacek (1993) identify that high-achieving college students can struggle with creating peer relationships as well as the need for guidance in educational and career planning.

Research on how to meet the needs of high-achieving student populations is scarce and so additional research is needed in order to better inform advisors and educators about how to best identify and meet the needs of this population (Dougherty, 2007). High-achieving students are the focus of this current study because not much is known about how these students develop and use resilient behaviors to persevere through the challenges of their first year in college. The current study seeks to investigate how high-achieving students use and learn from resilient behaviors specifically during the academic and social transitions of their first year in college. This research will serve to fill the knowledge gap in the existing literature about high-achieving students and their ability to be resilient. This information may assist professionals in higher education improve their advising or interventions with high-achieving students.

1.2 INQUIRY SETTING

The impetus for this investigation is based on my experiences as an advisor to high-achieving college students, or students who perform strongly academically and also are involved with social and professional experiences outside of the classroom. As an advisor to students who have earned four-year merit scholarships (which can include, tuition, room and board, fees, and extra funds for professional opportunities, depending on the specific award and financial

package) upon their admission to a public four-year research institution, I have noticed that many of these high-achieving students, while extremely successful in high school, often struggle within their first or second semester on campus both academically and socially. From my advising conversations with these students over the past several years, I have learned that many of them have never experienced failure in anything they have done. Therefore, when they encounter a challenge in college (such as coursework that they do not understand, for example) and then do not achieve the results that they believe are expected of them, it is simply devastating to them. They often feel confused, stressed, and pained, and generally embarrassed by the experience. Though the emotional reaction seems to be somewhat similar from student to student, each individual who goes through a challenge seems to have a different story to tell regarding the context of their experience. For example, one student I advised believed that they would be a doctor but failed their first college biology course, another student had a difficult experience living with their roommate, and yet another student struggled to maintain their motivation for school given all the freedom and opportunity their independence afforded them in college. It is especially intriguing that each individual seems to have a different level of self-awareness as well as an understanding of their *own* role or behaviors in the challenge that they faced. Although many of them eventually are able to persist through their challenges, I wonder if there are better interventions that I could provide (or my institution could provide) in an attempt to teach or foster more resilient behaviors from this group of students. Each of my advisees' stories has stayed with me and I hope that this study will help other students in the future who experience a similar phenomenon. My motivation to conduct this study is rooted in a desire to improve my own professional practice as an advisor to high-achieving college students and to help other professionals in higher education do the same.

This study was conducted at the University of Pittsburgh, a public four-year research institution with approximately 18,000 undergraduate students located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The University is located on an urban campus where approximately 97% of first-year students live on-campus during their first year. For this study, I collected perspectives from a sample of college sophomores and juniors from the university who have been identified as high-achieving students based on grade point average and campus engagement criteria. I have access to and relationships with gatekeepers that will assist me in studying this student sample in this particular inquiry setting.

1.3 STAKEHOLDERS

Although there are many stakeholders in the problem of first-year college student resiliency, the students themselves are the primary stakeholders in their academic and social success. This study focuses on high-achieving students and how they describe their resiliency development during their first year of college. This stakeholder group typically experiences intense pressure to do well in all areas of their college experience (in the classroom, student leadership opportunities, community service, research or professional development activities, and social settings). Because these students tend to be highly motivated, they might seek advice and build close relationships with staff or faculty more regularly than their peers. However, when this group of students struggles academically or socially, they might experience powerful shame or embarrassment that could threaten their ability to be resilient.

Other major stakeholders in this problem of practice include staff and faculty who work closely with high-achieving students. These individuals often serve as teachers, advisors, and

mentors to this group of students and as such have an investment in helping them to succeed both inside and outside of the classroom. These stakeholders have a great opportunity and responsibility to influence and intervene in the student experience in ways that encourage student growth and development. The staff and faculty provide opportunities and challenges and often have opportunities to build strong relationships with these students.

The upper administration at institutions of higher education are also stakeholders in that they are ultimately responsible for strategic planning and allocation of resources for the university. They have the power to make investments in programs and services that can help students to thrive on campus. The administration also is committed to ensuring the success of their high-achieving students because they have the possibility to not only increase the quality of the student body profile but they also can be targeted as potential donors as they graduate and move into alumni status.

The administrators of Honors Colleges and honors programs are also a stakeholder group. Though not all high-achieving students are involved with Honors College activities, the students who participate in Honors programs are typically high-achieving students who are motivated to work toward similar high academic and co-curricular standards. The results of this study could be useful for the Honors College administrators who advise Honors students and have opportunities to encourage the development of resiliency in their students.

The last major stakeholders are the parents, guardians, and families of the students. Although each family's ability and capacity to provide social, emotional, and financial support to their students varies from one family to the next, these relatives are often key individuals in the lives of students. Their relationships with their students are often important influences and should be further examined as a part of this study.

1.4 PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Professionals who work with high-achieving students do not have specific recommendations on how to help these students develop resilient behaviors in a higher education setting (Dougherty, 2007). This study explores high-achieving student perspectives on how they experience, navigate through, and learn from stressful experiences in their first year of college. High-achieving students often experience high expectations to excel in all areas and as such feel intense pressure to perform well and are averse to failure. Therefore, this study aims to expose what institutions and individual advisors can do to provide and improve resources that best support the comprehensive academic and social needs of high-achieving students.

The three research questions that guide this study explore how high-achieving students describe stressful experiences, how they describe coping with stressful experiences, and how they describe their learning as a result of those experiences. This qualitative study follows a hermeneutic phenomenological approach (van Manen, 2014) with the goal of creating a richer understanding of the lived experience of being resilient as a high-achieving first-year student. For this study, I interviewed 10 sophomore or junior high-achieving students at the University of Pittsburgh who I asked to reflect on their first year experiences, the challenges that they faced during that time, and how they have come to understand their learning from those experiences. By examining the phenomenon of resilient behavior development in high-achieving students more in depth, it is possible to understand more about the types of student experiences that may be difficult for high-achieving students, the support on which high-achieving students rely, and expose areas for improvement in teaching or encouraging resilient behaviors in the first year of college.

The results of this study can be helpful to professionals at higher education institutions

who want to help high-achieving students build resilient behaviors within their first year and beyond. Broadly, the purpose of this study is to provide greater insight for higher education leaders as they work to develop high quality programs and resources for this population. In more specific contexts, having a greater insight into the types of interventions that promote the development of resiliency for students can improve the interventions that individual advisors and student affairs practitioners are able to make as they interact with high-achieving college students.

In Chapter two, I present a review of literature to provide a fuller description of the concept of resiliency to set the conceptual context for this study. In Chapter three, I provide a description of the methods used to explore this phenomenon including explanation of the data collection and analysis procedures. Chapter four provides an overview of the findings from the interviews. In Chapter five, I provide conclusions of key findings and implications of the study as well as recommendations for future research. Chapter five also includes a description of my Demonstration of Practice which fulfilled my degree requirement to publically present my research findings and demonstrate my proficiency in this topical area.

2.0 REVIEW OF SUPPORTING SCHOLARSHIP

Chapter two serves to define the concept of resiliency as it is experienced by college students. The review of supporting scholarship literature includes different perspectives and research findings about how resiliency is defined and how it influences the experiences of first-year high-achieving students. The following guiding questions allow for exploration of this concept in different higher educational settings and cultural contexts to promote a broader understanding of the topic. The questions that shape this review of literature, then, are:

- How is resiliency defined and conceptualized? What factors contribute to one's ability to be resilient?
- What is known about the resiliency of first-year college students? What are the issues that result from a lack of resiliency in college?
- What interventions have been helpful in encouraging resiliency among first-year college students?

This inquiry will draw on research from many disciplines and schools of thought including psychology, student development theory, and other social science research. The review of literature will be mostly limited to sources produced in the last 30 years in order to provide appropriate historic context while focusing mainly on the issues that are most pressing for college students who are currently completing their studies. Though the present inquiry will be qualitative in nature and will be rooted in a constructivist framework, for the purpose of this

review of literature, studies with a variety of methodological approaches and theoretical perspectives will be examined in order to more broadly examine the existing evidence and knowledge. The inquiry will primarily focus on traditionally aged students at four-year institutions in the United States, as this is the context for the current study.

In the review of the literature on the topic of *resiliency*, three major themes have emerged. First, in comparing different sources, it is evident that *resiliency* is defined and understood in many different and complex ways. Secondly, the literature suggests that there are many factors which influence one's ability to be resilience. Lastly, the nature and effectiveness of institutional interventions to promote resiliency in college students are examined. Each of these three themes are explored in depth within the following sections.

2.1 RESILIENCY IS A COMPLEX CONCEPT TO DEFINE

The first major theme that is present in the literature around this topic is that the word *resiliency* is defined and conceptualized in several nuanced ways. This section will examine several interpretations of *resiliency* and how the meaning of this term varies. Additionally, this section will also present an analysis of the multiple factors that can influence one's ability to be resilient in different contexts.

2.1.1 Interpretations of resiliency

One definition of the word *resiliency* refers to a phenomenon of overcoming or coping with challenges (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005) indicating a linear process where an individual faces a

challenge and then must navigate in different directions through or around obstacles in order to persist. One example of this type of resiliency might be illustrated in terms of an academically undeclared student who must weigh many options in order to decide which major or field of study to pursue. A slightly different perspective, however, defines *resiliency* as the capacity to bounce back from difficulties (Meyer, Licklider, & Wiersema, 2009). In this sense, an individual might experience a setback (such as earning a poor grade on an exam) and then have to recover from lost progress to get back to where they were before that challenge came into being. In the instance of the student earning a poor grade, the student might need to complete extra work (such as pursuing tutoring, changing study habits, or attending faculty office hours) to make up for the loss in their progress. It is possible that similar coping strategies may be used to overcome the problem regardless of whether the individual is *navigating through* a challenging decision or is needing to *bounce back* from a setback. However, it is important to note that these distinctive interpretations of resiliency exist even though the differences are nuanced.

2.1.2 Resiliency as both a process and a characteristic

There is also some discrepancy in the conceptualization of resiliency as it can be understood as both a *process of coping* as well as a *personal characteristic* that may be developed over time as the individual is exposed to challenging situations or decisions (Ahmed & Julius, 2015). The view of resiliency as a *process of coping* is explained by the idea that individuals can possess capacity for effective adjustment despite potentially difficult or threatening circumstances (Jayalakshmi & Magdalin, 2015). In this sense, resiliency is the process of adapting to circumstances in a way that can result in positive outcomes. This process can also be explained as a leveraging of personal strengths to minimize the negative impact of a challenging situation

(Ahmed & Julius, 2015). The conceptualization of resiliency for this current study aligns with the idea that resiliency is a process of coping.

An alternative perspective explains resiliency as a *personal characteristic* rather than a process. Along with traits such as self-efficacy, optimism, and hope, resiliency is thought to be a contributing factor to one's overall psychological capital (Goertzen & Whitaker, 2015). The idea of resiliency as a characteristic or trait is highlighted by one recent study in which eight major themes were found to be present in resilient individuals (McQuilkin, 2014). These traits included perceived hardiness, decisiveness, visionary attitude, empathy, will to thrive, emotive strength, internal locus of control, and dedication (McQuilkin, 2014). This study included data from 87 participant interviews and led to the development of a sustainable resilience development theory which speculates that the degree to which an individual possesses these eight traits will determine the length of time in which the individual is able to overcome adversity (McQuilkin, 2014). In the study, individuals with greater capacity for these resilient behaviors were able to navigate challenges more quickly and with less negative impact than those who were not found to possess these traits quite as strongly (McQuilkin, 2014). It is especially critical to recognize and understand the traits associated with resilient behaviors because there is evidence to suggest that personality traits can be used to predict college performance and retention (Tross, Harper, Osher, & Kneidinger, 2000), which could be useful to higher education leaders.

It is also important to note that resiliency is conceptualized differently depending on scholarly perspective and schools of thought. Although some would view resiliency as being a psychosocial phenomenon (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), others believe it to be a biological consequence of brain development (Blimling, 2013). From a biological perspective, the human

brain is still malleable during late adolescence and the capacity for complex cognitive processes is still in the early stages of development. Because college presents new challenges in terms of diverse social and intellectual situations, the late adolescent brain must develop new ways of processing and reacting to these changes (Blimling, 2013). From this viewpoint, one reason why traditionally-aged college students make illogical or risky decisions is because they are in the process of developing the capacity for “cognitive self-regulatory control” (Blimling, 2013, p. 16). The idea that resilience is both a part of brain development as well as social development complement the idea discussed previously that resiliency is multidimensional and a product of many different factors (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Though the differences in definition and conceptualization of resiliency may seem subtle at first, it is important to clarify different ways of thinking about this topic because it lays the conceptual foundation and approach for this current study.

2.2 FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE RESILIENCY

A second major theme presented in the literature is with regard to the many factors that influence resiliency or resilient behaviors. The evidence described in this section highlights the internal and external influences on resiliency, the influence of academic, social, and emotional preparedness, and the health and wellness factors that influence resiliency.

2.2.1 Internal and external factors

In reviewing the literature around the topic of resiliency in college, it is also clear that there are many factors that influence resiliency and these factors are multifaceted and complex. An analysis of different studies on this topic shows that a combination of internal and external factors influence student resiliency. Chickering and Reisser (1993) would define this combination as a *psychosocial* dimension (*psych* referring to internal elements and *social* referring to external elements). These internal and external factors are represented by different names and their definitions may vary slightly across studies. For example, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) discuss the importance of understanding the impact of college on students with respect to individual and environmental factors. Alternatively, Hartley (2011) conceptualizes resiliency as a combination of interpersonal factors (such as tenacity, tolerance of stress, and adaptability) and intrapersonal factors (social support). These dimensions could also be considered in terms of emotional (internal) and social (external) health (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003) or even through the lens of self-compassion (Neff & McGehee, 2010) and social connectedness (Schreiner, 2010). However, regardless of terminology, both internal and external factors have been found to have an impact on student performance and retention (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Hartley, 2011; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003), well-being (Neff & McGehee, 2010), and life satisfaction (Krumrei-Mancuso, Newton, & Eunhee Kim, 2013).

Although internal factors appear to be important to student success (Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2013; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003), prior research suggests that both internal and external factors (in other words, the psychosocial factors) influence resiliency. In order to illustrate this relationship, a conceptual model for the current inquiry is presented in Appendix A. In the conceptual model, the relationship of internal and external factors on resiliency is indicated with

arrows. As one example of this, Neff and McGehee (2010) found that self-compassion (an internal factor) was strongly associated with well-being among both adolescents as well as young adults, but additional findings suggested that family support and environment (external factors) also contributed to the participants' ability to be self-compassionate. This signifies that there may be a dynamic and multidirectional relationship between internal and external factors (indicated by the double sided arrow between internal and external factors in Appendix A). Similarly, Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) support this view by describing that in addition to needing the skills to cope with stress, students also need resources such as supportive parental relationships and social environments in order to maintain resiliency in difficult times. With this information, it is reasonable to conclude that in addition to being prepared with a personal arsenal of adequate coping skills, students also need to have a supportive environment in order to be resilient.

2.2.2 Academic, social, and emotional preparedness

In addition to the relationship between internal and external factors, it is important to explore the influence of academic, social, and emotional preparedness. When students face a challenge such as being academically, socially, or emotionally unequipped to engage in a college environment, they may be more at risk for failure across a variety of areas. This is a significant issue because there is evidence to suggest that students are facing these challenges on a large scale. Approximately 72% of students entering college are not ready for the academic rigor of college-level work (ACT Inc., 2015) and around 60% of students report feeling emotionally unprepared for college (Heffernan, 2005). Further, over half of first-year students (54%) report that they have a hard time making new friends and feeling like they belong in their institutional

environment and just over half of college students (51%) found it difficult to find emotional support when they needed it (Harris Poll, 2015).

With students facing these issues on such a grand scale, it is worth taking note of how academic, social, and emotional preparedness influence performance and behavior. One way to measure this is by considering grade point averages (GPAs). Though not all students begin college with the same capacities and abilities, students who reported feeling less emotionally ready for college are more likely to have lower GPAs (Harris Poll, 2015). Additionally, in a study examining college freshmen students at a small private university in Connecticut, academically underprepared students were found to have different academic needs and personality traits of their more academically prepared peers (Melzer & Grant, 2016). Among first-year college students considered to be academically underprepared, participants were found to be less likely to seek out important institutional resources such as academic counseling or tutoring assistance and they also struggled more with career decisions than their peers considered to be more sufficiently prepared for college (Melzer & Grant, 2016). Another problematic indicator may be with regard to students' engagement with risky behavior. For example, there is wide evidence to suggest that first-year college students are particularly susceptible to alcohol abuse which also has a negative impact on academic performance (Crissman Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; Harris Poll, 2015; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003).

2.2.3 Health and wellness

Another potentially harmful influence of students lacking resiliency is with regard to personal wellness, especially mental health. In a study of 446 women in their second year of college, the level of resilience significantly predicted depression (Ahmed & Julius, 2015) as measured by the

Conner Davidson Resilience Scale (Conner & Davidson, 2003) and the DAAS Scale (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). Additionally, the researchers found a positive correlation between academic performance, resilience, depression, anxiety, and stress among women college students (Ahmed & Julius, 2015). Academic performance (as measured by the participants' fourth semester grades) was found to significantly predict depression, anxiety, and stress. This study helps to establish evidence for how personal capacity for resiliency can be a predictive factor for the wellness and engagement of students and therefore can potentially lead student affairs practitioners to provide more targeted approaches or resources. The sample of participants used in the Ahmed and Julius (2015) study differs slightly from the sample that is intended for the current inquiry as it only included female participants and the current study will include a mix of genders. As the participants in the Ahmed and Julius (2015) study were students in their second year of undergraduate study, it may offer a close comparison to this current study that will include sophomores as well. Regardless of the differences in sample, these results are helpful to consider in that they provide a view of the future harm that early lack of resiliency in the first year of college can lead to later in one's academic experience.

It is important to consider the health risks that result from lack of resiliency but it is equally critical to examine the benefits that may result when resilient behaviors are present. A recent study (Jayalakshmi & Magdalin, 2015) conducted with 125 first-year undergraduate college women also found a significant relationship between resilience and mental health. This study concluded that individuals with greater emotional intelligence (or the ability to recognize and express their emotions) were more successfully able to be resilient as evidenced by their ability to manage stress, solve problems, be optimistic, and overcome challenges (Jayalakshmi & Magdalin, 2015). These findings suggest that resilient students were able to seek people who

supported them, to find humor in situations, to have courage, to develop realistic plans, to be confident, and to be enthusiastic (Jayalakshmi & Magdalin, 2015). If higher education institutions can help to teach or foster emotional intelligence in first-year college students, this may be one way to improve student performance and wellness. The next section of this literature review will describe interventions that have been found to be helpful in promoting resilient behaviors among students.

2.3 INSTITUTIONAL INTERVENTIONS

Among the institutionally led interventions that have been designed to support students in their first year of college, interventions that focus on relationships have been found to be useful to students. In addition to examining the nature of those supportive relationships, this section will also review some strategies that institutions have found to be helpful in teaching resilient behaviors.

2.3.1 Relationships

Students develop critical relationships both inside and outside of the classroom (Fallon, 2015). In using a holistic view of higher education, it stands to reason that there may be dozens of relationships that influence a first-year college student's experience including parents, peers, advisors, staff, faculty, teaching assistants, roommates, romantic partners, friends, classmates, resident assistants, and more. Because academic outcomes of first-year students are influenced by both personal traits as well as social support needs (Melzer & Grant, 2016), it makes sense

that institutions would seek opportunities to support social and emotional needs through formal or informal mentoring and advising relationships.

One formal relationship students might experience is with their professors and instructors. Fallon (2015) describes teacher-student relationships as being instrumental to the development of resiliency in students' intellectual attitudes but also argues that the current operation of faculty is not enough to help students. By applying Fallon's (2015) argument to other mentors, advisors, and outside-the-classroom educators with whom students develop relationships, it can be inferred that these other educators have a great responsibility to create relationships with students that go beyond traditional transactional purposes in order to provide fulfilling experiences for college students.

It is not only the quantity of these support relationships that matter, however, but rather also the quality of the relationships. In a multi-institutional inquiry on advisor-student relationships, the three main relational attributes that were found to be of most importance were honesty, autonomy, and a balance of challenge with support from the advisors (Ferris, Johnson, Lovitz, Stroud, & Rudisille, 2011). These reported results suggest the importance of high quality advising relationships as it relates to the growth of college student leaders.

2.3.2 Teaching resilient behaviors

In addition to supportive relationships, there is evidence to suggest that it is possible to teach resiliency through coping and behavioral strategies. Goertzen and Whitaker (2015) suggest that interventions (such as leadership education programs) can strengthen psychological capital. This reinforces the idea that interventions can assist students in developing positive psychological capacities. Although many institutions may already have programs and interventions in place to

assist students with their transitions (such as PATH – Program for Accelerated Thriving and Health – described by Gerson & Fernandez, 2013), the statistics showing recent increases in mental health issues (Berrett & Hoover, 2015) demonstrate that there is a need for improvement in these programs and development of additional interventions to more effectively assist students in their transitions.

Another example of an intervention that goes beyond the outside-of-the-classroom approach previously described is using a specific pedagogical approach to teach or encourage resiliency in students. One such approach that uses storytelling as a teaching strategy was found to be instrumental in students' ability to learn the concepts of resiliency in a classroom setting (Meyer, Licklider, & Wiersema, 2009). The students in the study were able to learn from stories and apply the messages to their own lives and address the issues they were facing. The findings from this study indicate that there exists a way to teach resiliency in order to “prevent students from being devastated by crisis, challenges, and setbacks” (Meyer, Licklider, & Wiersema, 2009, p. 130). This classroom intervention using the storytelling approach could be a useful tool in helping students to shape their perspective of the issues they are facing and help them think intentionally about problem solving and decision making. For higher educational leaders and student affairs professionals, these findings on critical relationships and intervention strategies highlight the importance of investing in strategic partnerships with academic partners and students as well as the need to encourage comprehensive support for students throughout their transition.

2.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

These major themes indicated in the initial review of the literature help to further clarify the questions that guide this inquiry and also inform a conceptual model of first-year college student resiliency (displayed in Appendix A) that are utilized in this study. This conceptual model displays a linear journey of an individual through the first year of college and highlights some of the influencing forces (both internal and external) that can lead to academic and social outcomes. The review of literature on first-year student resiliency suggests that the period of transition is a very individualized process, aligning with the perspective of Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) that resiliency is both contextual and content-specific. For example, some students may face short-term or long-term stress or face multiple risks simultaneously (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Additionally, students enter college with different developmental abilities and resources (Tinto, 1993) that are noted in the conceptual framework as *pre-college factors*. Despite the individualization of resiliency, there are some internal and external components that are usually present although the degree of actual and perceived impact could differ from student to student.

In addition to describing the conceptual model of resiliency that is used in this study, it is also important to examine the theoretical assumptions that guide this inquiry. Resiliency theory is one of the lenses that can be used as a framework for this study. This theory considers a strengths-based approach to understanding student development, meaning that it focuses on the positive factors in students' lives (Zimmerman, 2013). These positive factors thus emphasize the potential need to adopt or adjust strategies in order to improve upon those strengths (Zimmerman, 2013). By leveraging individual strengths, it is possible to minimize the negative impact of risk or threats (Ahmed & Julius, 2015). The intent of using this particular theoretical framework for this inquiry is that it is centered around the potential to lead to practical

interventions designed to help students reach their full potential and develop into high functioning human beings.

3.0 METHODS

The purpose of this study is to better understand student perspectives regarding the context of stressful first-year experiences as well as how students respond and learn from those experiences. Because the first year of college is filled with many academic and social challenges (Bundy & Paul, 2003), it is a prime context in which to explore student stress and resilient behaviors more in depth. To explore the resilient behaviors of high-achieving students, I used one-on-one interviews structured by the concept of hermeneutic phenomenology or the study of the lived experience (van Manen, 2014). I studied the experiences of 10 sophomores or juniors at the University of Pittsburgh who were considered to be high-achieving students based on their GPA of 3.5 or higher as well as their involvement with co-curricular activities at the institution. Throughout the interviews, I asked students describe their challenges in their first year of college and how that shaped their understanding of their own resiliency. By more fully understanding this phenomenon from the student perspective, it is possible to discern some patterns in the various ways that students experience resiliency in the first year of college. In Chapter three, I provide a description of the research questions, the hermeneutic phenomenology research design, the participant recruitment and selection process, and demographic information about the participants. Additionally, I include information about the Institutional Review Board approval, data collection and analysis, trustworthiness, confidentiality, and the methodological limitations of the study.

3.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to meet the needs of high-achieving college students, educators need additional information to understand students' experiences as well as specific recommendations on how to best advise and promote resiliency in their first year of college. As stated above, the aim of this study is to explore how students utilize resilient behaviors when facing challenging or stressful situations. To examine this problem of practice, this inquiry focuses on student perspectives of stressful experiences during their first year of college. The research questions that guide this inquiry are:

1. How do high-achieving students describe stressful experiences from their first year in college?
2. How do high-achieving students describe coping with their stressful experiences from their first year in college?
3. How do high-achieving students describe their learning as a result of coping with stressful experiences in their first year?

I explored these questions through a qualitative study that included viewpoints from high-achieving students through one-on-one interviews. Each research question was used to guide the interview process and served as the framework for participants to tell their stories of resiliency. Together, the three research questions provide a comprehensive structure for the way that I interpreted findings from the interview data and ultimately constructed my key findings from this study about how students describe, cope with, and learn from stressful experiences. The research questions are each explained in greater detail below.

The first research question is: How do high-achieving students describe stressful experiences in their first year of college? By exploring this question, it is possible to learn about

what kind(s) of experiences students say are stressful. In Chapter two, I reviewed literature that suggested that there are a variety of challenges that students face in their first year of college including academic, social, and health challenges (Bundy & Paul, 2003; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). This research question explores if high-achieving students face similar challenges and if so these difficult experiences are primarily related to academic stress, social stress, or other types of challenges. Additionally, this question gives insight the timing of these difficult experiences. For example, one participant recalled the stress of building new relationships during the college orientation period while another participant recalled stress from their second semester when relationships from their hometown were more difficult to maintain thus creating urgency for finding closer social networks on campus. The timing and context of the stressful experiences that participants provide are useful in understanding the context of the phenomenon of resiliency.

The second research question is: How do high-achieving students describe coping with their stressful experiences? This research question examines the students' process and behavior as they navigate a perceived stressful experience. Prior research in this area suggests that problem-solving, seeking social support, and avoidance are commonly used strategies among college students (Deasy, Coughlan, Pironom, Joudan, & Mannix-McNamara, 2014; Luyckx, Klimstra, Dueiez, Schwartz, & Vanhalst, 2012). In addition, this second research question also serves to identify what (if anything) was helpful to them in coping with their stressful experiences. These coping strategies reveal the problem-solving process that can include both the self-reliant behaviors as well as the external interventions, resources, and relationships that play a role in one's ability to be resilient.

The third research question is: How do students describe their learning as a result of coping with stressful experiences in their first year? Prior research in this area suggests that the ways in which students tell the story of their resiliency can shape their perceptions and choices (Meyer, Licklider, & Wiersema, 2009). This research question explores student perspectives on resiliency and how students make meaning of their skills and ability to cope with challenges. It also serves to understand if students recognize their resilient behaviors and, if so, if it influences the way that they behave when they are in challenging or stressful situations in the future. This research question is important because it asks about self-awareness and how this awareness may influence future behavior. For example, when a participant experienced stress after failing a test during their first semester of college, they realized the importance of attending their professor's office hours and then implemented this strategy more proactively during their next difficult class. As the goal of this study is to develop an in-depth understanding of the way that high-achieving students perceive stressful situations from the first year of college, these three research questions highlight individual student stories that provide insight into the types of resources, relationships, or support that can be useful to encourage resilient behaviors.

3.2 HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGY RESEARCH DESIGN

Given the objectives of this study, the design that is most useful for the exploration of this problem of practice is an inquiry using a hermeneutic phenomenology approach. Phenomenology is a research approach that is based in philosophy and focuses on the meaning that people make from an event or experience rather than focusing on a subject or person (van Manen, 2014). The aim of phenomenology is to gain an understanding of and provide insight

into how human experiences are described and understood. Hermeneutic phenomenology is a specific approach that uses reflective and descriptive methods to depict lived experiences (van Manen, 2014). Due to the interpretive nature of hermeneutic phenomenology, the meaning of this phenomenon will be created primarily through interpretations of the participant's words. A hallmark to this approach is the focus on deriving meaning from pre-reflective experiences or ordinary every day experiences that are reflected on in conversational manner (van Manen, 2014). The phenomenological perspective is consistent with an interpretive research approach because I inquired about the essence of the participant's experience of resiliency (or lack of resiliency) as a first-year high-achieving college student and then used interpretations of their words to develop a deeper understanding of how they construct meaning from that experience.

This methodological approach strongly aligns with the phenomenological focus on individuals and how their perceptions of resiliency influence their college experiences. This view also allows for thorough consideration of context and situation in a way that survey analysis could not provide. Because there has already been much exploration of first-year students from a quantitative, post-positivist perspective, this less-used approach could further clarify issues that have been identified already or perhaps discover new meanings that have not yet been explored.

My approach is informed by a constructivist paradigm in which the researcher explores complicated concepts that focus on multiple, constructed realities, interaction with participants, and rich description (Mertens, 2015). Further exploration of this inquiry from a constructivist approach could enable student affairs practitioners to more thoughtfully consider the individual needs of high-achieving students and ultimately provide better resources and higher impact services for this population within the first year of college. With this approach, the researcher

seeks understanding with the goal of developing subjective meanings of the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2007). In this study, I achieved this by asking open-ended questions, listening carefully to the stories that the participants share, and allowing for discussion with participants.

To explore first-year student resiliency through a constructivist lens, I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants to probe deeply into the phenomenon of resiliency as it is experienced by college students. The semi-structured interview is a combination of a structured and an unstructured interview (Jaccard & Jacoby, 2010) and the protocol for this study (see Appendix B) included some scripted questions to guide the participant to talk about certain topics, but then also allowed for additional probing questions to further explore what the participant described. Specifically, open-ended questions are appropriate to use in the interviews as they enabled the discovery of original responses and rich description. An additional benefit of using interviews is that it allows the researcher to build rapport with the participant helping them to feel more comfortable in revealing additional details about their experience that might not have been previously expected or known. Further, one-on-one interviews allow for the illumination of unique cases that help to clarify the complexity of the concept of resiliency and the diversity of the ways in which participants experience this phenomenon. Exploration of this topic using this method may enable practitioners to more thoughtfully consider the individual and diverse needs of first-year students to ultimately provide better resources and higher impact services for this population.

3.3 PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION

I used criterion sampling paired with maximum-variation sampling to identify participants who were considered to be appropriate for the study. The criterion sampling strategy means that participants must have met a certain set of criteria (Mertens, 2015) to be considered high-achieving students. This is consistent with hermeneutic phenomenology because this approach requires that participants be selected based on the criteria that they have lived the experience that is being studied (van Manen, 2002). For the purposes of this study, the criteria for high-achieving students was, first, that the participant must currently have earned a cumulative 3.5 GPA or higher throughout their time in college, and secondly, that the student participates in at least one or more co-curricular activities at the institution. Co-curricular activities may include leadership positions, student organization involvement, research, internship, and other institutional activities. The purpose of obtaining a sample of participants who are involved with at least one co-curricular activity is to gather a sample of students who may demonstrate investment in campus life by pursuing educational, professional, and social opportunities outside of the traditional classroom experience, in contrast to students who may only participate in classroom experiences. This allows the data and findings to have a broader perspective of the student experience which reveal the complexity of college experiences and transitions that go beyond strictly academic situations. In addition to this initial criteria, all participants were enrolled as full time students (at least 12 credits per semester) at the institution. Students who have transferred to the University after their first year of college and international students were not included in this study.

In conjunction with criterion sampling, maximum-variation was also be used as a sampling strategy. The purpose of using this strategy was to most effectively maximize the

variation within the sample (Mertens, 2015). For the purposes of this study, I selected participants who demonstrated involvement in different areas of campus life (different organizations, leadership positions, research, jobs, etc.) in order to increase the chances of having diverse experiences represented. I also selected final participants to purposefully maximize variation among race, gender, class standing (sophomore or junior), first generation status, and location of the high school they attended (in state or out of state).

The students who self-selected to participate were pre-screened prior to inclusion in the study sample. In the pre-screening process, I distributed and collected an email questionnaire from potential participants to confirm that the participants met the minimum criteria for the study (i.e. currently earning a 3.5 GPA or higher and involved in at least one co-curricular activity on campus) (see Appendix C for pre-screening questions). The pre-screening questionnaire was also used to obtain demographic information such as gender identity, racial identity, academic major, and first generation status. The answers to the pre-screening questionnaire helped me to identify final participants for the study. Participants who met the criteria were purposefully selected in order to obtain a sample that includes variation in identities (such as gender and race) and experiences (such as outside the classroom involvement) in order to allow for a breadth of perspectives to be included in the study.

To recruit participants for this study, I solicited current sophomores and juniors who were identified as eligible to join Phi Eta Sigma, an institutional chapter of a national first-year honorary society. All students eligible for Phi Eta Sigma must have earned a minimum of a 3.5 GPA after their first or second semester in college. I obtained a list of the students eligible for Phi Eta Sigma in 2016 and 2017 which in total was 2,236 students (1,123 sophomores and 1,113 juniors). I selected 200 students from each group by using Excel to assign a random number to

each student and then sorting them randomly and choosing the first 200 students from both lists. I sent one email to the 400 randomly selected potential participants and received 64 email responses back from those interested in participating. I responded via email to each potential participant by asking them to complete a pre-screening questionnaire. Of those who initially expressed an interest, 37 students completed and returned the prescreening questionnaire to me via email. The pre-screening questionnaire results disqualified three participants from the study because two did not meet the criteria of being a sophomore or a junior and one did not have a 3.5 GPA or higher. Out of the 34 eligible students, 14 were invited to schedule an interview and a final sample of 10 students participated in individual 60-minute interviews.

3.4 PARTICIPANTS

Of the 10 participants, four were juniors and six were sophomores, four were female and six were male, and two would be considered to be first generation students because neither parent had earned a four-year college degree (see Table 1). The self-described racial identities of the participants included one Chinese American participant, six White participants, one Biracial participant (Caucasian and Black), one White and Cuban participant, and one African American participant. Half of the participants (five students) attended a high school in Pennsylvania and half (five students) attended a high school outside of Pennsylvania.

Table 1. Sample Demographics

Pseudonym	Class Standing	Gender	Parents with a 4-Year College Degree	Race	High School	Area of Study
Shelby	Junior	Female	No	Chinese American	In State	Math and Science
Brian	Junior	Male	No	White	In State	Arts and Humanities
Alina	Sophomore	Female	Yes	Biracial (Caucasian and Black)	Out of State	Arts and Humanities
Trevor	Sophomore	Male	Yes	White	Out of State	Math and Science
Emily	Junior	Female	Yes	White and Cuban	Out of State	Arts and Humanities
Jimmy	Sophomore	Male	Yes	African American	Out of State	Math and Science
Sam	Sophomore	Male	Yes	White	In State	Math and Science
Lynn	Sophomore	Female	Yes	White	In State	Arts and Humanities
Phillip	Junior	Male	Yes	White	Out of State	Business
Jacob	Sophomore	Male	Yes	White	In State	Math and Science

3.5 INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

I obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval prior to data collection. All participants were given an informed consent agreement prior to their interview which had been approved by the IRB. Each participant reviewed and signed the form to indicate their understanding that their participation in this study was entirely voluntary (see Appendix D for Example Consent Form and Appendix E for Interview Introductory Script).

3.6 DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected in the form of one-on-one semi-structured interviews during the Spring 2018 semester (in February 2018) in which were asked to retrospectively describe stressful experiences related to their transition into college. All interviews lasted between 50-65 minutes and were audio recorded. The interview protocol (see Appendix B) included some scripted questions to guide the participant to talk about certain topics, but then also allowed me to ask additional probing questions to further explore what the participant described. This protocol was aligned with the hermeneutic phenomenology method because participants had the opportunity to reflect on their perspectives and behaviors as it related to these specific stressful experiences in their lives. The main structure of the interview focused on the three identified research questions: description and interpretation of stressful first-year experiences, coping with those experiences, and learning as a result those experiences. As an example, I asked each participant to describe a difficult or stressful period in their college transition, and then I followed up by asking how they were feeling, what they might remember thinking about during that time, or what actions they took to respond (or not respond) to the situation. The rich description resulting from the interviews led to an understanding of how students perceive stressful experiences, how these stressful experiences were managed, and the ways in which students describe their learning as a result of stressful experiences.

In order to prepare for the interviews, I conducted a small pilot study. This pilot study was conducted in December of 2017 and consisted of a semi-structured interview with one participant. Although the data from the pilot was not used in the final study, the information gathered from this pilot interview was used to inform and refine the final interview protocol.

3.7 DATA ANALYSIS

To prepare for analysis, the audio recordings of the interviews were be transcribed into text. I used a professional online transcription service to complete this task. Prior to data analysis, I checked for accuracy by reviewing all transcriptions along with the audio to ensure precision and to make any edits as needed. The transcripts were uploaded to NVivo, a software tool which helps researchers to manage and analyze data. Coding of the data was completed in three parts: initial coding which was open ended and broke down the data with descriptors, pattern coding to organize similarly described data, and focused coding to categorize data based on concepts or themes (Saldaña, 2009). I began the data analysis by reading through each transcript and using open coding through which I created categories of patterns or themes that emerged from the data (Merriam, 2009). From those initial emergent codes, I reviewed transcripts again to check for any codes that were missed during the first review. I then reviewed the codes to search for patterns that could be grouped into larger categories (Creswell, 2007). After identifying the categories, I re-read the transcripts to check for any missed themes and to further refine the categories or subcategories as needed. Finally, I used focused coding for the purpose of refining the codes into concepts or themes.

Throughout the coding process, I also engaged in memo-writing. The memo writing allowed me to begin giving context to the emergent themes by writing notes and interpretations about the data (Glaser & Strass, 1967). As relationships were examined between the descriptive data (what happened) and the interpretive data (the meaning that was derived from the experiences), I used these memos as preliminary contributions to my overall understanding of the data and used them to begin to identify emerging themes.

One of the distinctive elements of using phenomenological approach is to identify and account for personal perspective through epoche and reduction (van Manen, 2014). During this process, I created an artifact of my professional knowledge and personal thoughts through the practice of bracketing. I used bracketing during the memo-writing process to identify personal subjectivity such as any inferences made beyond what was described by the participants as a way to have a greater understanding the thoughts, ideas, and perspectives that I brought to the study. The purpose of this was to create a more sophisticated analysis as it allowed me to ascertain greater clarity between the participant's experience and my own experience. A heuristic phenomenological approach allows for the bracketed information to later become a part of the interpretive process (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, my personal thoughts, ideas, and perceptions were able to be included in the final interpretations to help contextualize the findings. The process of bracketing played an important role in this study because it helped me to notice how I empathized with students about particular experiences and to think about how my empathy influenced my interpretations of the data. Additionally, my past personal experiences also helped me to be familiar with the inquiry setting such as the campus climate for high achieving students and the external interventions and resources that are available at the institution. Bracketing helped me to use my past experiences as an advisor to high-achieving students at the institution to provide clarity and further contextualize the stressful experiences.

3.8 TRUSTWORTHINESS

After the interviews were concluded, I used member checking to increase the trustworthiness of this study. To do this, I wrote a memo outlining my initial findings and sent it via email to each

of the participants. I asked them to respond to three questions (see Appendix F) regarding their initial thoughts about the memo, if they experienced any disagreement with the memo, and if anything had been left out that they wished to include. Out of the 10 participants, four responded. Although two students offered points of clarification about what they had said in their interview, none of the responses had a significant impact on the final findings and conclusions of this study.

3.9 CONFIDENTIALITY

Throughout the study, maintaining confidentiality for the participants was important because many participants described personal information throughout the interviews. This personal information included description of family problems, mental or physical health conditions, grade information, and behaviors that may have been in violation of the University's student code of conduct. In order to protect the anonymity for participants in this study, all participants were assigned a random pseudonym that was used throughout this final manuscript. Additionally, any quotes or information which could identify the institution where the study was conducted, the names of specific campus buildings, or the names of student organizations were changed or excluded. All information from original audio recordings or transcriptions that includes personal or identifying information will continue to be kept confidential in a locked cabinet or password protected digital files. This confidential data includes email communications with participants and consent forms as well.

3.10 METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There are limitations of this study due to the selected methodological approach. Because I used a phenomenological approach, this study is not meant to make generalized conclusions about this population of students. Instead, this study shares a description of the experiences of a few individuals. While this study provides a phenomenological description of the lived experience of high-achieving students in their first year of college, I cannot conclude that my findings are applicable to other high-achieving students. Rather, the aim of phenomenology is to gain an understanding of how human experiences are described and understood (van Manen, 2014). Therefore, it is important to note the limitations of the methodological approach when considering the findings and recommendations for practice. Additional limitations of the study, including limitations created by the scope and sample, will be discussed in Chapter five.

4.0 FINDINGS

4.1 CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the findings that resulted from the interviews that were conducted with high-achieving students regarding their experiences in the first year of college. Sections that are included in this chapter are an overview of the findings from each research question.

First, the types of experiences that participants describe stressful or challenge experiences are explored. Participants reported a variety of academic, social, and health issues as being challenges to them in their first year. In addition, students also reported that their high expectations and pressure to achieve contributed to their first year challenges. Among the many reactions to these stressful situations, students reported feeling frustration, worry, anxiety, and disbelief.

Secondly, the ways in which participants describe coping with these challenges were explored. Participants described using both positive coping strategies as well as maladaptive strategies to help them work through their problems during their first year. Students also reported using both independent and dependent strategies to cope with their problems. Independent coping strategies are strategies that did not require the assistance of others in order to solve the problem while dependent strategies are strategies that require help from others. Students' behaviors indicated a preference for independent strategies suggesting that high-

achieving students may be more likely to rely on themselves to work through a problem rather than ask others for help.

Third, students shared the many lessons that they learned as a result of the stressful experiences. The students experienced personal reflection and growth as well as a realization that some stress was useful and could even lead to positive outcomes. Students also became aware of the importance of sharing stories of resilience with others. In discussing what they had learned, students revealed that they often see themselves as having unique experiences and that only upon reflection or through sharing stories do they realize that some of their experiences are similar to others.

Throughout the interviews, additional findings about how students conceptualize resiliency emerged. As such, this chapter concludes with a discussion of how participants thought about resiliency, failure, and their perceptions of their own resiliency.

4.2 HOW HIGH-ACHIEVING STUDENTS DESCRIBE STRESSFUL EXPERIENCES

The types of experiences that the participants described as stressful or challenging in their first year of college were varied. Of the many stressful experiences that participants shared, several of the experiences were related to academic performance and finding friends, however, other challenges included making decisions about an academic plan of studies, dealing with both mental and physical health issues, and managing expectations and pressure to achieve highly.

4.2.1 Academic challenges

Despite being high-achieving students with a 3.5 cumulative GPA or higher in their sophomore or junior year, several participants described their first year in college as a time that they struggled academically – and specifically the first time that they had struggled academically in many cases. Although the context of each challenge was slightly different from participant to participant, most of the issues revolved around earning poor exam grades. For several participants, earning poor grades on an exam resulted in feelings of shock and disbelief. It was a difficult emotional experience for students to be in a position where they were academically underperforming. Particularly for students who were experiencing academic struggle for the first time in their lives, their feelings of helplessness were quite pervasive and sometimes left them feeling stuck and unsure of what to do next. Some students recognized that their first-year academic challenges were caused by their own assumptions that college coursework would come easily to them. This perception was often validated by their strong high school academic performance and reinforced by years of confidence in their academic abilities prior to arriving to college. Because of their own expectation that they would succeed academically in college, several students intentionally enrolled in honors classes or in classes with particularly challenging or advanced subjects. These decisions, along with somewhat misguided assumptions of their own academic abilities, resulted in academic struggle during their first year in college. This specific experience seemed to be more common among students who were enrolled in science classes or in more technical majors versus students who were enrolled in courses related to humanities.

Despite some students having academic challenges, all were able to persist throughout their first year and maintain an overall GPA of 3.5 or higher. The descriptions of academic

challenge presented by participants were often isolated incidents. In other words, students reported that, although they struggled with one exam or one class, it did not have a huge impact overall on their ability to maintain a strong cumulative GPA or ultimately on their ability to persist in college. Though they were able to recover from those isolated situations, the process of facing those barriers has left a lasting impression on how they perceive themselves and their abilities.

4.2.1.1 Assumptions about college and one's own abilities

As one example of academic challenge, a participant named Trevor described a situation where he struggled with a difficult honors physics class which he shared was his biggest obstacle during his first year. Trevor came into his first year of college feeling confident about his academic abilities and did not anticipate any academic challenges in college based on his strong academic performance in high school. This prompted him to enroll in honors physics rather than a regular-level physics class. He explains his attitude prior to taking the class:

I think I thought coming in like it's going to be easy - like I went to a really great high school. Like I'm good at math and science. Like I'm good. Like I like excel in everything and it's all going to be, you know rose beds or whatever. And then kind of coming in to see like the disreality of that.

As evidenced by this passage, Trevor describes being “blindsided” by this honors physics class because his expectations of how he thought he could perform (i.e. his “disreality”) in that class were much higher than what ended up being actually possible for him (i.e. his reality). Although Trevor said he performed well on the first honors physics exam by earning an 80%, he describes his frustration with taking the second exam which left him with an overwhelming sensation of helplessness. He said:

I am not sure like if you've ever had an experience like this, but sitting in a room for three hours just staring at a piece of paper, getting so frustrated because you

can't do any of it. I had studied super hard. I had known that information was difficult and it was the first time in my life that like I felt helpless. I was like I've done everything in my power to be successful and I knew that like obviously for my drive and motivation that like I was trying my best and still those kind of successes weren't made to the extent that I know I did so poorly. I was hoping for a 50 percent. You know I'm frustrated.

In hindsight, Trevor said that he probably should not have taken the honors physics course and would have likely earned a better overall grade in the class if he had taken regular-level physics.

Trevor's experience was similar to Jacob's experience. Jacob was another student who felt that he had also somewhat overestimated his academic abilities by enrolling in an honors macro-economics class his first year in college and ended up with a 56% final grade in the class. Jacob said that he was just taking the class to fulfill a requirement and that looking back on the experience that he had "no business" taking that honors-level class. Jacob, like Trevor, made his decision to enroll in a more difficult class because of how he excelled in high school. Jacob said:

In high school I never really had something that I struggled to grasp and couldn't. College, I've had a couple of topics that I've put in the work and still not done amazingly.

In Jacob's case, he notes the difference between his high school and college experiences in terms of his effort to understand a topic. In high school, as long as he made an effort to understand concepts, he was able to be successful. However, in college, despite giving his best effort, sometimes he was not able to understand concepts. Like Trevor, Jacob's prior assumptions about collegiate-level coursework and confidence in his academic abilities led him to seek a more difficult class experience which negatively impacted his overall GPA.

In contrast to Trevor and Jacob who had an academic challenge during their first year, another participant named Shelby faced a struggle during her second year in college which she had not been expecting due to her strong first year academic performance. Shelby said:

I was really stressed out at the time because I did pretty well my freshman year. So, I thought it would be something similar my sophomore year as well. And then, o-chem came and, yeah, I did end up getting a C+ in the course. That's something that I did not expect. Because, like, high school came pretty easy to me, so I never expected I'd get a grade like that. When I first received my first exam back, I was really shocked by the grade I got. But it's something that – it [organic chemistry] just didn't click with me.

Shelby's perception of her own abilities based on her high school and first year in college were challenged by this particularly difficult science course during her second year. Unlike Trevor and Jacob, Shelby did not intentionally choose to take a more difficult class; rather, the organic chemistry class was a part of her plan of studies. However, she experienced a similar sensation to Trevor and Jacob in that her perceptions of her own academic abilities were challenged. Shelby's slightly different example helps to illuminate that regardless of the timing of the experience (for example, first year versus second year of college), this type experience can still have a strong impact on self-perception of academic abilities.

4.2.1.2 Reactions to academic challenges and feelings of disbelief.

Some of the reactions students had to academic challenges were similar across different experiences. As evidenced by the passages above, emotional reactions such as feeling shocked, frustrated, or helplessness were common. Additional examples in this section describe how students felt worried and upset about their academic performance. These feelings were present especially for students in science and technical majors more so than students studying majors in the humanities. Feeling of disbelief did not seem to be connected with whether the class was a requirement for their academic major or an elective class that they chose outside of their plan of study. One theme that was pervasive throughout many students' experiences, however, was the experience of disbelief. In these cases, disbelief was experienced as a feeling that "this situation or mistake does not describe who I really am" or "I didn't think this could happen to me". This

theme was present in several of the academic challenges that were described throughout the interviews and represents a disconnection between the student's perceptions of their academic abilities and the reality of the situation.

As an example, one student named Emily, described her emotional response to performing poorly on an exam in the following passage:

I cried after that test. I've never cried after a test. But he [my professor] gave me like a personal anecdote about his first test in college and how that same thing happened to him and like he was just trying to console me but ultimately like I knew I was just not prepared.

Though her professor had tried to help her feel better about the situation, Emily was distraught and overwhelmed by intense emotions. In her case, Emily knew that her poor performance on the exam was due to her lack of preparation. Despite knowing this, her emotional response indicates that she still somehow expected to do well. This suggests Emily felt overconfident about her ability to pass an exam when she was not properly preparation. When she found out she did not pass the exam, she was upset because the incident exposed her as a student who could no longer (or not always) rely on her current intelligence, abilities, and talents to carry her through successfully. Her reaction suggests a growing realization that she is now the type of student who may fail an exam if they are not adequately prepared. Previously, she did not expect that something like this could happen to her.

Like Emily, another student, Sam, experienced similar feelings of disbelief after earning a 62% on his first chemistry exam during his first semester in college. Though Sam suspected that he did not do well on the exam, when he received the exam back, the reality and severity of the situation began to become clear. He talked about the moment that he learned his score on the exam as being a moment of disbelief. Sam said:

I remember getting the score back and just being shell-shocked because I knew like taking the exam I didn't feel well about it but also like actually seeing the

grade on paper is very different than just having a feeling that you did bad. I'd say definitely shock and then like worry especially being like the first exam not knowing like how the rest of the class would go and if I'd be okay in the class.

As indicated in the passage above, Sam, like many others, described feeling "shocked" when he received his grade. Once he began to recover from the shock, he started to think about the consequences that could result from his performance.

Another student, Alina, also experienced an academic situation where she experienced disbelief and worried about the potential consequences of her actions. Alina described an experience during her first semester in college where she accidentally slept through her first mid-term exam in college. She explained what happened:

This was actually for that Sociology of Gender class. I had an alarm that just, like, did not go off on my phone. Like, for whatever reason it just didn't work. And my friend, Casey, who is another really good friend that I made actually in the class...she called me, but my phone was on silent. So, I had, like, three missed calls from her. And I just basically just woke up an hour later and was just distraught – like what do I do? Like, college is already so different than high school it's, like, if you missed a test [in high school] there was, like, at least some semblance of chance you could still get, like, a B in the class. But with college it's, like, no, even if you make a 100% you still might fail the class because there are so little opportunities to change your grade. It's just, like, somehow there's just disbelief. Like, in high school, I was a rather productive and responsible student, you know? I'm used to, like, getting pretty much predominantly "A" grades and stuff. I mean, you just get to here and it's like, you know, I just completely messed up. Well, it's one of the first moments in your life where it's, like, so much less so redeemable. I immediately called my mom and, like, was crying like, "Oh God, I don't know what to do."

As described in the passage above, Alina experienced disbelief that she found herself in this situation where she had been irresponsible enough to miss a major exam. In her interview, she explained how she had never made a mistake or "messed up" like this before and so the gravity of situation felt extremely intense to her. This situation caused a major incongruence between what she had previously believed about herself (that she was a responsible student) and her actions (sleeping through the exam). Because she felt like the situation had been out of her

control, she felt like what happened was not an accurate representation of who she was as a student and felt unsure of how to communicate her struggle to her professor especially because she understood the severity of the mistake.

Alina's story, along with Emily and Sam's poor performances on exams, highlight the emotional responses to stressful academic situations as well as the feelings of disbelief that result from acting in a way that is not congruent with one's prior perceptions. However, Alina's experience differs from Emily and Sam's experiences in that Alina perceived her situation as a mistake, or an accident that was out of her control. In contrast, Emily and Sam perceived their challenges as poor performance potentially resulting from a lack of adequate preparation. This difference is important to note because provides a distinction between a challenge that is perceived to be beyond one's control versus a challenge that is perceived to be within one's ability to control or influence. Though both types of challenges resulted in feelings of disbelief, there may be a subtle difference in how the students assumed responsibility for the problem. By identifying her problem as a mistake (outside of her control), Alina protects herself in a way from being totally responsible for the situation because it is possible that others may perceive her problem as a mistake as well. Emily and Sam, however, realize that their own actions (or non-actions) caused their challenges, making them solely responsibility for their own predicaments. They do not receive the same protection that Alina receives which therefore heightens their sense of responsibility for the consequences.

4.2.1.3 Vivid recollections

Throughout the interviews, it was clear that many students could easily recall the specific circumstances that lead them to underperform in their classes. In addition to remembering the general context of the situation, it is interesting that almost all of the participants who spoke

about facing academic challenges seemed to remember their struggle in vivid detail even though it had happened several months or years before the interview. In fact, as evidenced in some of the passages above, many students described the exact percentages that they earned on those difficult exams demonstrating perhaps the significant extent of the emotional distress that had resulted from those situations. For instance, Sam only remembered his lowest exam score (62%) but he was not able to recall the exact percentages he earned on subsequent exams that helped improve his overall grade in the class. Because he spent so much time and energy worrying about his lowest exam score, that is the predominant detail that he remembers about that situation, rather than the grades of all of the other exams he did well on.

4.2.1.4 Variation in academic experiences

It is important to note that there were many variations in the way that students described their first year academic experiences. One variation is that not all participants experienced academic struggle. For these students, their perceived academic abilities strongly aligned with the classes that they had chosen and so they were able to continue to excel academically throughout their college transition. Additionally, for those who did experience an academic struggle, there was variation in the way that students experienced and perceived their challenges. As such, students reacted to similar experiences in different ways and implications of the struggle were interpreted differently as well.

For the students who specifically mentioned that academics were not a problem during their first-year transition to college, they tended to rely on past academic skills they developed that were able to be effortlessly translated to college courses. Both of these students were enrolled in classes in the area of humanities rather than science courses which they described as being a good match for their skillsets. In addition to having a strong match between their

abilities and the level of coursework, they also talked about how they were able to quickly adapt to the rigor of college courses suggesting that they possessed an certain aptitude for adjusting to college work. For example, two participants, Lynn and Brian, said that academics were never really a challenge for them – in high school or at any point in college. Lynn said:

My classes weren't really a problem. It's a bit stressful like at first just getting used to the structure of how everything works and how to like interact with professors in a different way than you would in high school.

Brian said:

I don't know, school has always been something that comes rather easy. Like sitting down and just writing out a paper, test taking - it's never been that much of a challenge. ... Arabic threw me for a little bit of a loop just because it is Arabic and that took a little bit of tweaking study skills, but it isn't too much of a challenge. Overall, I was pretty prepared.

These passages suggest that, for both Lynn and Brian, the adjustments they needed to make in their collegiate-level studying or preparation were manageable and so they did not experience setbacks like the others described.

Among those who did experience academic challenge, however, there were notable variations in the way that students perceived their struggle and what constituted poor academic performance. Some students, like Emily, were shocked and devastated by earning a poor grade while others, like Shelby, were surprised at first but then were gentler on themselves and more accepting of the outcome. Though I interviewed them several months after these incidents occurred, Emily was still upset by what happened while Shelby had already moved on even shrugging at one point as she said “Well, C's earn degrees.” This suggests that Shelby was able to reconcile the incident as being one small setback in the long process of earning her degree but ultimately not something that would derail her from her goals.

Additionally, the concept of a “poor grade” is relative to one's own attitude and expectations. For example, while Trevor was ashamed of earning a “D” grade in honors physics,

Shelby described feeling proud of earning a “C” grade in organic chemistry due to the great level of effort she put forth to earn that grade. This variation in experience and perceptions of academic struggle may be due in part to different personalities, different expectations of themselves, and differing abilities to understand the actual consequences of one poor grade in an overall collegiate experience.

4.2.2 Finding and maintaining social networks

Another salient theme presented in the interviews was the process of finding and maintaining relationships with friends. Like with the academic challenges that students experienced, there was also variation in the stories that students told about their social transitions to college. From these stories, a few major themes began to emerge around the process of finding and maintaining social networks during their first year. First, each student arrived to college with differing levels of social skills. While some students had outgoing personalities that were more beneficial to meeting new people and being in social situations, other students were more reserved and therefore had a more difficult time making meaningful connections with others. A second theme that emerged was that many students explained that their expectations of what their social life would be in college did not match up with reality. It took some students awhile to figure out that they needed to adjust their expectations in order to accept that their social networks could look differently than they expected but still be fulfilling. Third, a few students mentioned feeling stress over the need to be accepted by their new group of friends. In some cases, these students took risks that they would not normally have taken in the hopes of securing approval from their new friends. Fourth, students who had specific interests or identities seemed to be able to make social connections more quickly than students who were still more exploratory with their

interests. Many students used interest or identity-based student organizations on campus as a way to connect with friends who shared a similar outlook on life. Though some described eventually moving away from these groups to pursue other friendships, their membership in these organizations provided a sense of comfort and belonging early on in their first year of college. Lastly, students made a distinction between what it means to find friends versus what it means to find the *right* friends, or people who are invested in the relationship and have the potential to be life-long friends.

4.2.2.1 Social skills and personalities

Though finding friends was a highly discussed first year challenge, one of the interviews that really brought this struggle into focus was my interview with Lynn. Lynn's example highlights how influential social skills and personality can be on the first year transition. Lynn talked at length about how finding friends was the single greatest challenge and source of stress in her first year of college and continues to be a challenge for her into her sophomore year. Lynn came from a tight-knit group of friends in high school and so coming to college was a big shift for her socially. Because she had been friends with the same group of people for many years prior to college, Lynn never really practiced her social skills in terms of meeting new people. Additionally, Lynn had a more reserved and quiet personality which led her to prefer spending time with herself rather than in social situations. These two circumstances – her lack of practice at being social with new people and her reserved personality – created challenges for her first year social development. She further explains how her struggle to find friends during her first semester impacted her desire to stay at home over her on-campus residence:

I went home a lot first semester just because it was kind of difficult. Most of my [high school] friends didn't stay in the area for college so like it wasn't really possible for my high school friends and I you know like get together most of the

time... But it was – I don't know, it was sort of difficult because I kind of kept feeling like I don't know if I was doing something wrong - I came to college like really excited to make new friends.

Though Lynn left campus to go home several times throughout her first semester, she was somewhat disappointed to find that her old high school friend group was not the same as it once had been. She explained that her inability to connect with old or new friends took a toll on her mental health during her first year:

I don't know, it was kind of depressing. I mean I was depressed, so it was depressing but like, it was just kind of difficult... I didn't really like my roommate that much either which didn't help...It was also like, you know, coming out of my room and not like knowing people in the lounge or like knowing how to talk to people in the lounge. It was difficult... But when I really started to think about it I'm, like, why am I not making friends? Why is this not happening?

As evidenced in the passage above, Lynn internalized her struggle by wondering what was wrong with her. Though she had a desire to make friends, she recognized she had a lack of social skills to be able to do this successfully which led to a sense of helplessness and confusion. Her social skills and personality preferences made it challenging for her to know what to do about the problem.

4.2.2.2 Social expectations

Expectations also played a role in the ability to find friends in college. A few students described that their expectations of what social life would be like in college did not meet the reality of the types of friendships that they created. In some cases, it was difficult for some students to adjust to new expectations of what their social life would be like in college. One common expectation was that they would ideally find a large group of college friends that would define their college experience and whose time together would yield life-long memories. Though these expectations were mostly self-imposed, it seems likely that the image of the ideal college friend group could

have been strongly influenced cultural expectations portrayed in media, tv, and movies. Some students mentioned needing to adjust their expectations in order to recognize that there were multiple ways to feel fulfilled with a social network in college. One student, Phillip, also discussed not meeting the expectations he initially had for his social life during college:

I didn't really ever get the exact college friend group that a lot of people achieve where they have ten or so people that are all interchangeably friends in some way. I had four or five people that would hang out as a group sometimes. But mostly I would hang out with people on an individual basis, which is how I much prefer that.

Phillip's expectation of how his social life should look in college did not match his reality or his preferences. He had to adapt his expectations of what a desirable social life could look like and accept his own preferences as valid instead of striving to seek what society tells him is an ideal image of friendship.

Lynn also mentioned a disconnection between what she expected in her first semester and her social preferences. Lynn was disappointed in the fact that she did not secure a group of friends in her first semester. Her inability to meet the expectations she had for her first year social life left her feeling somewhat inadequate. She explains this challenge in the following passage:

I'm not really like a partier...but a lot of freshmen first semester like to go out and just like kind of go to parties which I totally understand but that wasn't like really my thing. So that was like one of the expectations that I didn't feel pressured into or anything but it was hard to like find people who just wanted to stay in and, I don't know, go to dinner or do something like that. And it was kind of like there's this expectation first semester freshman year that you're just kind of like going to find your friends all of a sudden and is going to be like really exciting to be in a new place.

In the passage above, Lynn describes her experience in coming to terms with the realization that something she expected to happen very quickly for her in actuality was going to take a much longer time to create. Both Phillip and Lynn's examples demonstrate the power of

expectation in perception of social challenges. Though Phillip and Lynn both believe that they currently are satisfied with their friends and social networks in college, it is not what they had originally imagined for themselves.

4.2.2.3 Taking risks in order to be accepted

A few students described feeling pressure to fit in with their new friends that they made upon arriving to college. In some cases, this caused students act in a way that they normally would not in order to prove their loyalty or impress their new friends. For these students, their social skills allowed them to make initial connections with new friends quickly, however, they discovered that *finding* people to be friends with was easier than actually *building and preserving relationships* with those people. Their efforts to solidify friendships sometimes resulted in taking risks that they would not usually take in hopes of being accepted. In an effort to live up to their social expectations, two students in particular – Emily and Brian – described how they were willing to push their own limits and go beyond their normal behavior in pursuit of that ideal social network.

Emily described navigating this challenge by being flexible and going along with the crowd:

As a freshman when you were trying to make those friends because you don't know anyone in you're in like a foreign city and you're like - who should I trust? It's kind of hard to figure that out and you kind of go with the flow until you realize that there's like a really, really bad situation that you want to get out of.

Emily went on to describe how her “go along with the flow” strategy resulted in her being at parties during her first year that put her in some compromising and arguably dangerous situations involving drugs and alcohol. Her desire to fit in with her new friends prompted her to make decisions that she knew would be risky.

Another student, Brian, also told a story about how he wanted so badly to make friends during the first-year orientation period, that he found himself in a situation where his new potential friends brought a case of beer into his residence hall room. This action is against residence life policy on campus, thus when they got caught, they were all cited and fined for the violation. He describes the incident:

My moral compass got challenged almost immediately because there was one night during orientation week that my roommate was like, ‘hey do you mind if like they [my friends] come over?’ And like ‘I already met them so like yeah that's great.’ They ended up bringing over a case of beer and we got an alcohol citation in the first week of school. And I had never had alcohol before so that was, you know, like – college really came in swinging....In the moment, I was overwhelmed. Like I called my mom and was like, ‘You'll never believe what just happened!’ And she was like, ‘Why did you let that happen?’ And I was like, ‘I just wanted to make friends!’

Brian’s desire to fit in and make friends resulted in him going against his better instincts to take a risk that for which he knew there could be consequences. Brian and Emily’s experiences are important to highlight because they differ from the previous examples by demonstrating that while some students may have less difficulty in actually *finding* friends, sometimes the pressure for acceptance results in students taking risks or pushing their personal boundaries. Though the actual process of finding friends was not difficult for some students, the lengths to which they would go in order to create or maintain friendships often came at a price.

4.2.2.4 Personal circumstances influence social connections

Another student, Jacob, experienced some difficulty with finding friends during his first year as well and believes that his decision to commute (rather than live on campus) also came at a steep price for him. Though Jacob’s story was not common among the participants in this study, it is important to include because Jacob’s social struggle was absolutely critical to his first year transition. Jacob’s experience as both a commuter and a student who works in addition to being

enrolled as a full-time student cannot be generalized to a broader population of commuters or students who work, but it is helpful to highlight as he provides a different perspective than his peers in this study. Jacob's priorities during his first year were different from his peers and thus his story exposes a different set of challenges. Managing the multiple demands on his time created unique challenges for him as he developed a social network in college.

As a commuter, Jacob believed that his need to balance his schedule between school and work was the single biggest obstacle that he faced in developing meaningful relationships on campus. Though he had his own residence hall room on campus during his first and second semester, he took a 40-minute bus ride to get to a cleaning job near his hometown and so would often stay at home (at his mother's house) to make it easier for him to get to work. He decided to move home permanently in his second year to make his education more affordable and to give him better access to his job during weeknights and weekends where he could earn more money and be more financially responsible. He explains:

I basically lived my weeks at [the University of Pittsburgh] and lived my weekends at home which was exhausting. It ate up a lot of my free time. And it ate up a lot of my opportunity to develop a social life on campus... Being a commuter is like being a little bit detached. [The University of Pittsburgh] does a great job of trying to make a commuter feel welcome and I do feel welcome on campus. The commuter lounge is a great tool. But I compact my classes together as much as possible to minimize the amount of time in between classes which means that I can't just stick around and, like, just chat with that person I just made a connection with in class. I have to go to the next class. And so, just not having that, like, hour in between to be, like, oh yeah, let's just continue talking about the course work and see how this goes. I feel like there are definitely a lot of friendships that had potential that didn't happen because I had to go. And then, as soon as my day was done, I have to get on the bus because I have work to go to.

Although his first two semesters were a struggle, Jacob explained that he eventually was able to make social connections on campus within the men's glee club, the Russian club, and through his academic departments. Jacob's experience provides a unique perspective in this study and though not all commuters and students who work may share his challenges, his

example highlights some personal circumstances that influence his ability to develop a social network in college.

4.2.2.5 Similar interests and identities promote early connections

Among those participants who described not having as much of a challenge during their first year, several students described being able to quickly identify potential friends on campus based on those who shared similar social identities or interests. A social identity is an individual's sense of who they are as it relates to their membership in social groups (McLeod, 2008). Social groups maybe based on racial identities, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status or religion. Some of the examples of social identities that participants in this study described were Chinese American (Shelby), African American (Jimmy), gay (Bryce), lesbian (Alina), working class (Jacob), Christian (Jimmy), and atheist (Jacob). Social groups many also be organized by similar interests, such as interests in certain intellectual topics (such as Jacob's participation in Russian club) or values and beliefs (such Lynn's engagement with a student coalition devoted to nuclear disarmament). These students' identities provide opportunities for inclusion in specific communities with others who share the same identity.

Student organizations and groups played a major role in the social transition for many of the participants in terms of creating a space where students of similar social identities and interests could gather. These groups provided a sense of comfort and familiarity that made the students feel easily accepted. It seemed that students who already had a strong sense of their identities and interests before coming to college were able to more quickly connect with friends in college and did not see their social transition as being a particularly difficult experience for them. Other students who were exploring multiple interests or still developing their identities seemed to take a longer time to find friends who were similar to them. Though several students

said that they are not necessarily as close as they once were with those groups, it still helped in easing the social transition and promoting early connections.

As one example, Jimmy found friends through organizations and programs such as in a mentoring program for African-American students and his weekly bible study meeting. Similarly, Alina described how she found the LGBTQIA+ student organization within her first week on campus. She describes how the group invited her to go to lunch and how she knew right away that the people in that organization would be her new friends and her new support system on campus. She explains that feeling “I was kind of, like, nervous when I first got here... And then after we went to [lunch] it was, like, a ‘this is it’ moment. Like, this is what I’m looking for here.” In a similar manner, Shelby also became closely involved with the Asian Student Alliance, Global Ties (an international student group), and SSS (a federally supported program for students with low socioeconomic and first generation status). She said:

I guess I overcame the struggle by joining a lot of organizations. So, for me, I guess my freshman year, because I’m Asian, so it was really easy to join the Asian Student Alliance. I feel like a lot of American-born Asians, like, start that way. They join an organization like that. And so, you find people who are similar. You find similarities.

Like Jimmy and Alina, Shelby explained that she quickly connected with these groups and attributes the ease of her social transition to having that support and seemingly “built-in” friend group based on social identities that she experienced.

4.2.2.6 Finding the *right* friends

Though the participants described varying levels of struggle in their pursuit of a new social network, many students explained the importance of finding the “right” friends or, in other words, people who would be true, life-long friends rather than just acquaintances or temporary friends. Anya described these types of friends as “my people.” Finding the right friends was a

priority for many students. It seemed that in hindsight, students realized that many of the new people they had connected soon after the start of their first year were relationships that were convenient, for example people who were easily accessible like a roommate or someone in the same residence hall. When these relationships were no longer convenient to maintain, some relationships became less relevant while others became more solidified. Other students also expressed the need for relationships where they could just be themselves. It seems that a part of finding the *right* friends also means finding friends that are accepting.

One example of finding the right friends comes from Shelby. Shelby explains that despite connecting with many new people during her first year, she realized that not all of her new friendships were of the same quality. She recognizes that the process of finding the right friends can take a longer period of time. Shelby said:

I think there's a difference between knowing people and, like, having a group of people that you can count on. I guess that [finding people you can count on] is a longer process because it takes time to really get to know someone. And then sometimes it takes a challenge to know who is, like, really around you, who is really willing to support you. So, I guess that's a slower process.

Lynn also made a similar comment, saying:

Yeah, I think once you start to like find people that are actually the *right* people to be friends with, you don't – like I still feel sometimes like I have to kind of *try* with this new friend group, but really the times I have more fun with them is when I'm not trying so hard to be funny or entertaining or like really look for people.

In this passage, Lynn described the need to be authentic in her relationships and explained how being herself leads to more of a quality relationship for her. Therefore, this reinforces that it is not only the act of finding friends that can be challenging but also the process of finding the “right” friends who will like you for who you are. This process is also extremely important and can be a struggle for some. Sam also commented on the need for authentic relationships in relation to his ability to reimagine himself in his new college environment:

No one knows who you are when you come to college. No one knows what you're like which means some people try to like rebuild themselves, which is fair because in college, it's the time for change and you grow as a person and everything. But also, you're still like the same person at the root. And so just like trying to find the right balance between like trying to make new friends but also making sure you're not like lying to yourself I guess, would be the right way [to make new friends].

Lynn and Sam both identify that there is a need for balance between being authentic and also being open to exploring new opportunities and friendships. Both of these students' perspectives suggest that there is a need for congruence with who you are by yourself and who you are with your friends.

4.2.3 Making decisions about academic plans of study

For some participants, the process of deciding on a major or academic path was cause for serious contemplation, while the process for others was quite simple. Some of the students who had less of a struggle to make a decision about an academic major said that they have an especially influential teacher or family member who was proficient in a similar field and so that example led them to find their passion in that area as well. Others felt like their major was just a good fit considering their academic abilities and interests. For some, though, the process of deciding on an academic plan of study was more challenging and complicated by the fact that they had many options given their broad set of academic talents and interests. One student discussed initially feeling confident about her choice of major but then after thinking more about the long-term career options, decided to pivot to a different academic path that fit better with her goals. In addition to the actual process of deciding on an academic plan of study, many students experienced a sense of urgency to declare a major as well due in part to a perceived stigma of

being academically undeclared. This label was seen as undesirable and so some students described picking a major somewhat prematurely just to avoid being associated as undeclared.

4.2.3.1 Process of choosing an academic plan of study

One example of a student that found their major easily was Trevor. Trevor felt like his path was just the right fit for his academic abilities. He said:

I wish I had a better reason for picking engineering in general other than I can. To that end, I may tell people this and I don't want to sound arrogant, but I have a brain gifted enough to understand what's going on. Like not everyone can do it. Like not everyone can even sit down for hours and hours on end and still not understand what's going on. Like it's difficult and so like I feel like it would be a disservice in a way for me not being engineering because like I have the ability to like comprehend what's going on and the drive take get what needs to be done, done.

Though it was easy for Trevor to visualize his path, for others, the decision of what to study was more problematic. For example, Phillip described being interested and talented in many subjects has made his decision more difficult.

For myself, I like, you know, anything and everything. So a lot of the difficulty I had is choosing what I want to do. Which seems when I say that to my friends they do not really understand, but like there are so many things I want to do - that is what makes it really difficult.

Phillip's talent in many areas made him want to consider many academic majors. The ability to achieving highly across many academic areas is referred to as multipotentiality (Fredrickson, 1979). This type of experience can be a unique source of stress for high achieving students. In Phillip's case, he felt pressured to make a decision about his major early on and so he did not necessarily have a chance to fully explore his options.

Like Phillip, Shelby made her choice of major early on. However, she started on one academic path only to find that she needed to make some adjustments down the line. Shelby

described her transition from pre-medicine to instead pursuing a path toward being a physician's assistant (PA).

So, I came in as pre-med. I feel like a lot of students came in as pre-med. And then you start to, like, learn more. You start realizing, oh, you need to do residency after med school and, oh, it's four years afterwards. And then how competitive it is to get into med school. So, it's like, that might not be the path I want to go down. And then so I started researching about other positions like PT - that's like the rehab school and stuff - and OT. And I was thinking, like, I still want to do something in the hospital settings and interact with patients. So, I was thinking PA may be a good route to go. That's what I'm pursuing as of right now.

In this decision, Shelby thought about her future and what kind of job would work in the life she wanted for herself. Once she learned more about her options, Shelby felt as though she was able to make a more informed decision, however, she has been careful to leave her options open just in case she might decide to change or refine her choices in the future.

4.2.3.2 Stigma of being undeclared

A few students described a strong sense of uneasiness and fear of being perceived as academically undeclared. Because high-achieving students are expected to excel academically, the label of being academically undeclared threatens their ability to live up to that expectation. In the higher education community, there is much discussion about the advantages and disadvantages to being academically undeclared. While some advocate for students to have opportunities to explore a variety of academic majors before committing (Freedman, 2013), others describe the negative influences of being undecided about a career because it can be expensive for the student (Ronan, 2005), it can threaten retention and delay graduation (Dennis, 2007), and it also can subject the undeclared student to a stigma of being unmotivated or lazy (Schmelzer, 2017). Being undeclared seemed to be interpreted by the students in this study as a weakness rather than as a way to intentionally explore academic and career options. For some,

the avoidance of being labeled as undeclared forced students to prematurely decide on a major. This was such an undesirable label for Phillip that this stigma pressured him into applying to be in a business major rather than entering college as an undeclared student. Phillip said:

I went to science-based high school and I wasn't very interested in the sciences. I didn't really want to do research for medicine or anything like that. So I decided that I'd go undeclared and then kind of last minute I decided I go toward business because I didn't know how it looks to apply undeclared...I think that was just a personal perception. I thought that a good candidate would probably know at least the field they want to go into.

Alina also experienced this uneasiness with the social stigma of being academically undeclared and so quickly decided on a major once she arrived to college. She said:

I just decided because I always got really worried. Like, I have no interests, like, you know, everyone else is a set in their major and here I am still undecided.

Although both students say that they are happy with the majors they ultimately chose, it is possible that the stigma of being undecided or undeclared caused some distress and could have caused them to prematurely confirm an academic plan of study.

4.2.4 Health issues

After academic and social challenges, another common source of stress during the first year of college was dealing with mental and physical health concerns. Seven out of the ten students I interviewed reported struggling with either mental or physical health during their first year. In terms of mental health, students reported that anxiety and depression as the two largest concerns that they experienced. Some of the mental health concerns continued from high school while others reported that new concerns came about from the transition to college or the stress of college life. Several students also recognized a close connection between their mental and physical health indicating that these two facets of wellbeing are perceived to be strongly

intertwined. Throughout these interviews, anxiety, depression, and other mental and emotional issues were described as being both a *source* of stressful experiences as well as also sometimes being a subsequent *reaction* to a stressful experience. A few students also shared how physical health incidents during their first year presented challenges either to their academic success or their ability to complete daily tasks. Though the contexts of the health concerns were different for each individual, these situations typically led to additional stress and sometimes created obstacles for the students. This section highlights some examples of both mental and physical health concerns that created challenging situations for the participants.

4.2.4.1 Mental health

Several students described having pre-existing mental health issues in high school that transferred into to their college experience. It was interesting to note the ease with which students were able to discuss their personal mental health challenges during the interviews. Many of the students commented that they were used to discussing their mental health with people who they are close to (such as family, friends, or counselors). Additionally, students seemed to express a strong awareness of how their mental health concerns were especially prevalent in their first year of college and also how their mental health influenced their ability to be successful or not.

Several of the students I interviewed disclosed that they had or are currently seeking counseling or other forms of therapy. Five out of the ten students I interviewed reported feeling anxious during their first year in college. Four out of the ten students reported feeling depressed during their first year. Though I am not qualified to make any conclusions regarding the clinical nature of the anxiety and depression described, I instead have compiled several examples which feature the ways in which students describe these experiences. The following passages highlight

the experiences of students who managed mental health concerns during their first year in college.

Lynn was one student who had experienced mental health concerns in high school and those concerns continued to be present for her as she began college. She talked about how her experience with anxiety and depression created social obstacles for her. Her lack of ability to make friends in college meant that she no longer had close friends with whom to discuss her challenges and this caused her to seek comfort and safety in the confines of her residence hall room. Lynn said:

All throughout high school, I had had depression and anxiety issues. I'd seen a therapist for a while because my parents were concerned, but it never fully went away. It just went away enough so that my parents did not make me see the therapist anymore. This is kind of a super stubborn teenage sort of thing, but I came to college and it was still really an issue ... And not having like a constant friend group like in high school, I didn't really talk about my mental health issues...So all the change just kind of exacerbated it and the anxiety was definitely an issue in terms of just even coming out of my room because I would sit there and like not want people to look at me when I came out of my room.

Though Lynn was suffering, she felt the need to hide her challenges from others. She did not want other people to notice that she was experiencing problems with her mental health. This behavior suggests that, as painful as it was, it was better for Lynn to hide these issues rather than to admit she could not handle it alone. This may be connected to her need to meet high expectations that she had set for herself. Her struggle with mental health contradicts the image that she has for herself as a high-achieving student.

Another student, Jimmy, also discussed his preference for isolation over sharing his mental health concerns with others. Jimmy's embarrassment about his mental health challenges created some social obstacles. In the following passage, Jimmy discusses his transition to living away from home for the first time and explains the difficulty that his mental health created during his transition to a new city. Jimmy said:

Nothing in [the city] is that uncomfortable for me. But sometimes, I have felt uncomfortable - not really because the location - but just like I feel lonely or because I feel depressed or because of anxiety. So yeah, sometimes I feel uncomfortable, but mostly it's just like mental stuff. I guess just because sometimes I wasn't healthy [during my first year], sometimes I'd isolate myself just because I just felt, like a strong degree of embarrassment because of my anxiety and like it was hard for me to study or be with other people.

Like Lynn and Jimmy, Emily also talked about how her mental health was influenced by her transition to college. Though the source of her stress seemed to be more specifically related to an incident over the summer before college, Emily's story provides an example of the juxtaposition between the problems her family was experiencing and the new and exciting opportunities presented to her in college. Emily described how an issue with her sister caused her to experience some major emotional shifts in her first year which left her feeling confused and unsure how to deal with it all. She said:

The summer going into college, my sister had had like two really big manic episodes to the point that she was hospitalized. So it was a very intense shift in my life, going from a very sad period of time where we're all coping and dealing with my sister's illness. And then for me to go to college and everything being perfect. It was just kind of like my body was saying like 'What are you doing, Emily? Like, you were stressed and down in the dumps like two weeks ago and now you're like everything's beautiful, the sun's out, and like you're eating popsicles with your parents [at Orientation], like this is weird.' ...I just felt like out of it, like not like myself. And I don't take any drugs or I don't drink excessively or do anything like that can alter my state of mind. So it was very evident that there was something wrong with me but I didn't know what it was.

With the transition to college, Emily had difficulty in processing all that had happened over the summer and was unsure of who she should be or how she should function in her new college environment. Like Lynn and Jimmy, Emily felt somewhat at a loss for what to do and faced these challenges alone.

4.2.4.2 Connection between mental and physical health

Several students recognized a strong connection between their mental and their physical wellbeing. While mental and emotional issues were sometimes described as being a *source* of stressful experiences, they also sometimes prompted a subsequent *reaction* to a stressful experience further exacerbating the problem. In other words, situations that challenged students' mental or emotional states sometimes had physical consequences that then further aggravated the problem. The students' experiences with mental or physical health sometimes created a negative and cyclical effect in that concerns in one area further advanced concerns in another area. One student, Trevor, describes how the emotional distress he had from doing poorly in his honors physics class ended up manifesting in some physical consequences as a result of his choices and behavior in reaction to that stress that he felt:

This is sad to hear, but it is I think the reality for a lot of students. I would leave that exam and I would pick up some dinner and then - probably the part that you don't want to hear is - that I would go out and like I would drink *a lot*. Like I would go out and drink to forget the exam, especially that second exam where I just knew I didn't do well. I was like really upset with myself. And after the fact, of course, you realize that that's a bad idea. But in the moment, you are so angry at like the professor and that kind of awful exam. But, I think more than that - and what some people don't admit - is that they are angry with themselves. Like it's 100% you are mad at yourself that like you didn't study hard enough, like you didn't predict what was going to be there like you didn't put the grind as much as you could have. For me that was especially frustrating and I couldn't reconcile the fact that college was this difficult and like it was this real. And so I just drank a lot.

For Trevor, his way of coping with emotional distress was to drink. He used drinking excessively as a way to escape his problems which had physical consequences. As he was not physically at his best, it made addressing his emotional distress and improving his academic performance even more difficult. Another student, Sam, also identified this relationship between mental and physical wellbeing. However, in contrast to Trevor, his story provides an example of

how his physical wellbeing influenced his mental wellbeing. In this next passage, Sam describes how he perceives this connection:

My freshman year a lot of the times, I wasn't as scheduled in terms of like my sleep schedule and also I wasn't working out...And then coming to college, I was like, well, I don't have time to commit to walking to the gym and working out for like an hourI'd say like physically, I just felt worse and like freshmen 15 didn't hit but like, I did gain a couple pounds and like I just felt like worse about myself. I think that like having physical health ties very strongly to having like mental health and that being mentally strong ties very closely with being physically strong.

For both Trevor and Sam, experiences with wellbeing during their first year were tied to the interrelationship between mental and physical health. When Tyler experienced problems with his mental health from doing poorly on the exam, it resulted in him drinking to excess which threatened his physical health. In contrast, Sam's dissatisfaction with his physical health created feelings of dissatisfaction about his mental health. These two students' experiences demonstrate how they perceive their wellbeing to be a dynamic and multidirectional relationship between physical and mental health. It is important for educators to be aware of how different dimensions of health can influence each other and also advocate for comprehensive campus health services that are inclusive of both physical and mental health.

4.2.4.3 Physical health

Though most students who cited health concerns as being a significant part of their first year said the concerns were related to mental health, other students described purely physical health challenges. The following section highlights a few of the physical health challenges that students experienced.

The first physical health issue was presented by Brian. He explained that he was sick with a bad cold at the end of his first-year and ended up having a 40-minute nosebleed right

before the final exam for his psychology class. Instead of attending the final, he went to the student health center to seek medical treatment. He described what happened as:

I got a B+ at the end of my freshman year and I was so mad about it...but I just kind of accepted that because I feel like it was out of my control...I could have taken the test anyway but after a 40-minute nosebleed, I didn't really want to go through with that. I think it was more just a personal decision that this isn't going to happen for me and so I was just stressed out enough about bleeding that I just also accepted the B+.

Brian was disappointed that he was not able to take the final which resulted in a lower grade in the class than he believed he would have received if he had been physically healthy enough to take the exam. But ultimately, he felt like the situation was out of his control and so there was not a lot he could do about the situation other than accept what happened and move on. Another student, Jacob, had a similar physical health setback as well. Jacob struggles with environmental allergies and was hospitalized three times during his first semester due to an uncommon grass allergy. He described his experience:

It's definitely frustrating. If you were to ask me what I fear, the answer is always going to be something that I can't do not because of lack of trying but with, like, an astronomically infinite amount of trying and I still can't. So, no matter how hard I try, if I step on that grass, I know I'm going to get sick. And there's nothing that I can do to change that.

Jacob's health concerns, along with the other health concerns highlighted in this section, provide a few examples of both mental and physical health concerns that created challenging situations for the participants in their first year.

4.2.5 Pressure to achieve and managing expectations

Another common theme throughout the interviews was with regard to dealing with the pressure to achieve. Because all of the participants reported that they performed strongly in high school

(both academically and socially), they had certain preconceived expectations for themselves about how they would succeed in college. These expectations were perceived as being unique to the individual meaning that the expectations they had for themselves did not apply in the same way to their peers. Most of these expectations were described as being self-imposed and yet seemed to be related to pressure from external sources such as parents as well as academic and social competition. In fact, several students specifically mentioned that their parents did *not* pressure them to do well but rather that their parents served in a more supportive role and, for some, were even the source of the student's inspiration to achieve highly. In some cases, students described needing to adjust their academic expectations based on the level of competition in their new college environment and peer group. The pressure to achieve also went beyond the classroom. Some students also felt pressure to excel in their social experiences as well and tried to live up to the perceived expectations of a college social life. These expectations often pressured students into making decisions that would help them to achieve more highly both academically and socially.

4.2.5.1 Pressure to excel academically

Many students talked about the expectations they had to achieve highly in academic settings during their first year. The level of achievement that the students experienced in high school reinforced these expectations for college. One example of this comes from Phillip's interview when he discusses how he believes he holds himself to a higher standard than other people:

I definitely hold myself to a really harsh standard... My parents never pressured me. My parents never told me you have to be great, you have to be amazing. I just saw everyone in my life doing all these amazing things. Like my dad built the house we live in, he's always provided everything for us and my mom is a social worker, a very capable woman. And so, I saw the successes of people around me and I wanted that. So yeah, the self-drive is kind of just my perception of everyone around me and who I admire and then I strive to be similar to those

people...And I'm like my own worst critic which I figured almost everyone says but I really am hard on myself. So if I don't do well it bothers me... To someone else if they don't have a good GPA, I'll say like 'oh it's not important' but then if *my* GPA drops like a point, I'm like 'oh my God, what am I doing?'

Trevor also discussed the role that his parents play in supporting him after he failed his honors physics exam. He said:

I would talk to them [my parents] right after I failed the exam, I was like, 'guys I just failed the exam' and they were like, 'oh no, you didn't.' And I was like, 'guys no, I actually failed this exam like, I know that I failed it, you know, I have very large confidence in my ability to have just failed that exam.' And they were like, 'well, we get it, this never happened to you before. If you want to talk to us, please do'...It's interesting, because they don't have to harp on me as much my brother, because they always know that I've always been very, very self motivated. I just, I see the goal, I know what it is and so they really are there for me to basically vent these emotions to be very open and honest with them and tell them like, this happened to me. And they don't really have to say, 'you have to keep your grind on', because they know that I will do that anyway. But they are there to be like, 'are you keeping your grind on? Have you been doing that?' And for me to say 'of course!'

So, in Trevor's case, he sees his parents as providing reminders for the goals that he has set for his own achievement. He perceives his parents as a sounding board that he uses to validate and reflect his own goals which he believes that he sets independently from his parent's expectations.

Another student, Sam, also believes that he sets his own goals but recognized that he needed to readjust his expectations of his performance once he arrived to college and started to witness other students achieving highly as well. This is an example of student

He said:

I would say that the more set expectations were from myself because I was a very good student in high school so like coming in the college, your expectations are those from high school but you have to realize that coming from high school, if you were like one of the top students even like at your school, whatever college you go to, you're going to be going to school with people who are all like the same person as you were in high school. And so now you're just one in a crowd and so you have to realize that those same expectations you once had can't be

applied to this new situation which is college and then you have to kind of figure out where you can set those to be reasonable for yourself.

In Sam's experience, he had to adjust his own expectations of what it meant for him to succeed based on all of the talent that he saw in his peers. Shelby was another student who also used her peers as a benchmark to solidify her own goals. In her first year, she observed the behavior of her peers and tried to mimic it by making her goals for herself align with goals that she saw her peers trying to achieve. She said:

Academic-wise, I did study a lot more [in college] than high school. I guess it's because I went to the library a lot. So, in that environment when everyone is studying, it pressures you to study as well. I remember one thing was, like, everyone is doing research. Everyone is searching for research. So, I really wanted to do that too.

This passage demonstrates that pressure can also come from academic competition and so expectations can be set based on the achievement of the peer group.

4.2.5.2 Pressure to succeed socially

Outside of academics, students also reported feeling pressure to succeed socially. As mentioned previously, many of the students said that when they were trying to find friends during their first year, they had certain expectations of what their social life and friend group should look like. These social expectations also extend to the social behaviors that students adopt in college.

Emily, especially, felt the pressure to have a good time in college. Emily explained that as a person of Cuban heritage, she was brought up in a culture where parties and alcohol are common. Because she experienced this type of environment before coming to college, her perspective on how to have a good time was different than some of her friends. Instead of avoiding the party scene, however, Emily explains the pressure she felt to fit in as “fomo” or the “fear of missing out.” She wanted to be accepted and liked by her group of friends and she

struggled to figure out how to do that without pushing her own limits. Emily often felt forced into assuming a caretaker role when she would go out with her friends, this caused her to have some resentment and problems with her first year friends. She said:

I think what else was really stressful last year was FOMO – it is a big deal in college. Fear Of Missing Out. Like everyone wants to go out and like party and stuff. Maybe it's because I'm from Miami, I've really seen all the party scene and like learned how to say no to everything that like is not good for me. I feel like a lot of people haven't so they come to college and they try crazy things and it just doesn't end well. I'm like the mom of my friend group... But I have a lot of friends that just don't know how to handle alcohol. I think that's a big problem, especially in American society because like in Hispanic culture like you, you're taught how to properly drink at a young age... So that's one of the hard things, struggling in college like picking which friends are good for you, like ultimately good influences and which ones aren't.

In this passage, Emily reveals that her “fear of missing out” pressures her into seeking social situations in an effort to prove to herself and others that she is having a good time in college. Even though she does not necessarily like being the “mom” or caretaker of her friend group, she feels that there are certain expectations that she needs to live up to in terms of her social life and so this role is one that she needs to play.

4.2.6 How students describe coping with stressful experiences

Participants described a myriad of coping strategies to help them get through the challenges that they experience in their first year of college. As high achieving students, it is not surprising that they have employed many useful and mostly healthy ways of dealing with their issues in their first year of college because many have had to practice self-reliance and resourcefulness in their past experiences in order to be successful. In talking about their stressful or challenging situations during the interviews, the students were quick to share how it was that they solved that problem. Most times, as they explained a challenge during the interview, student would

automatically explain how they solved their problem without any prompting from the next interview question. While most of the coping strategies described by students provided an appropriate or healthy response to the situation, some students also described maladaptive strategies or strategies that were either unhealthy or may have been somewhat useful in the short-term but not conducive to a long-term solution. It is possible that many students have been conditioned to focus on the positive and to highlight the positive behaviors that they have shown. It could also be possible that the power dynamic between the interviewer and interviewee caused students to focus more on their positive behaviors than on the potentially negative behaviors during their interview. For example, students may have perceived it to be risky to talk about maladaptive strategies they used cope such as drinking to excess. This could be related to the students' expectations and pressure to succeed. Narratives that do not showcase their positive coping strategies perhaps threaten the ideal image they have of themselves as a high-achieving student.

The majority of the coping behaviors that students described were independent strategies, meaning that they did not require the assistance of others to help them solve the problem. Additionally, students also discussed several dependent strategies that they used, or in other words, the strategies that required help from others. Overall, students described using independent coping strategies much more frequently than dependent strategies suggesting that they were more likely to rely on themselves to solve a problem rather than asking for assistance from others. The students' general reluctance to ask for help indicates a preference for self-reliance. In the same way that students may have been hesitant to talk about maladaptive behaviors, they may have also felt the need to maintain an image of themselves being strong,

independent, and capable students. The following section gives specific examples of both the independent and the dependent coping strategies that were described by students.

4.2.6.1 Independent Coping Strategies

The students discussed many independent coping strategies throughout their interviews. Independent coping strategies are strategies that students rely on themselves to enact. Table 2 provides an overview of the most commonly cited strategies employed by the students including how the students described putting that strategy into action. The majority of the strategies are positive or healthy strategies and are listed first. There were only two maladaptive strategies described and those appear last in the table. It should be noted that the judgment of whether a strategy was considered positive versus maladaptive was based on the student's description of the strategy and the outcome. In other situations, some of the positive strategies could be considered to be maladaptive, and some of the maladaptive situations could be considered to be positive. The labels given here are context-specific and were designated based on the individual's own description of the challenge, the action, and the outcome.

Table 2. Independent Coping Strategies

This table provides an overview of the most commonly cited independent strategies employed by the participants in this study and includes examples of how the participants described putting that strategy into action.

Independent Coping Strategy	Description of Strategy	Example of Strategy in Action
<i>Positive or healthy strategies</i>		
Positive Resilient Self-Talk	Positive statements that students either said aloud or thought to themselves to help motivate them or give them confidence throughout a challenge.	Brian said to himself: I made a friend group and I was doing fine, but then walking into a new group of people where everyone already knows each other and you have to be the one to go out of your way and like start making friends, just kind of really solidified that ‘I CAN do this and I CAN make friendships and just foster healthy relationships with whoever I need to.’
Assume responsibility	Do not blame others for your actions.	After sleeping in and missing her exam, Alina said: I should be willing to accept whatever outcome, you know, happens because this is above everything else, on me. Like, I did sleep in, you know? And that’s fully on me...I can’t blame anyone else for messing up.
Information is power	Being aware of all of your options and resources is critical to success.	Shelby: I’m really grateful that I am a first-generation and they invited me into that group [SSS]. Because I know if not, I’d have no idea where to get resources. Such as, my friend who is a junior just learned that there’s a pass-fail option for taking classes. But I knew that option because they [SSS staff] talked to us about it. She didn’t. And if I’m not a part of SSS, I have no idea where to get that. Like, who do you even talk to?
Adjusting expectations	Being able to reassess the situation and adjust your expectations according to the new information or circumstances.	Lynn: After Christmas break, I realized I had been sort of idealizing like my friends from high school because, you know, I wasn’t seeing them a lot and so I kind of forgot like the problems we had. So it was helpful to go back... but also remember like they are not perfect either. So I shouldn’t be looking for this perfect friend group in college.

Table 2 Continued

Acceptance	When circumstances seem to be out of your control, you just sometimes need to accept the situation and try to move on.	After dealing with his nosebleed, Brian missed his final psychology exam. He said: I just decided that it was fine. It was just Intro to Psych and I'm not a psych major and I don't plan on pursuing psych. I was kind of like, well this is acceptable, I guess.
Maintaining balance in your life	By having a routine to structure your day/week, you can ensure that you have time to do all of the things that are important in your life.	Sam: I make sure I get to bed at a reasonable time so that I can get up at 6:30am, get down to the gym at 7:00, get a good workout and then after having that, I have a great start to my day because I'm up early so that I can start getting stuff done.
Having confidence or faith	Having confidence in your abilities to solve a problem, or by having faith in a higher entity (God, karma, or luck), can give you comfort and reassurance that things can work out in your favor.	Jimmy: I don't think I stressed out that much... I just really think it was my relationship with God that really facilitated how I met my time outside of just prayer and Bible Study and stuff. It just helped me just like really managing myself and just made everything less stressful. I know for sure that that was it.
Think logically/think through the consequences	Thinking through a complicated situation logically and outlining the possible consequences, a course of action may become clearer.	Trevor: I always complain about how little time I have. And yet like, on the weekends like, from the moment that you start getting ready to go to that alcohol party...let's say that is 8am, okay? Say you pregame...That's at least an hour... You go to that event, that event is probably 3 to 4 hours long.... You go to bed, next morning you're probably hungover...So from that 8am to let's say, conservatively you wake up at 10am... You are hungover, you can't work...let's say like you are good to go at 1pm, you've just wasted almost 17 hours, right? That's just easy math.
Practice	If you keep practicing a difficult task, you will improve.	Jimmy: I just think like a lot of practice problems...I believe that it can help me to really get the concept in mind. That's something I always recommend to other students you know just to practice problem, practice problem, practice problem.

Table 2 Continued

<p>Know your limits</p>	<p>By understanding how far you can push yourself, you can make sure to respect those boundaries.</p>	<p>Sam: I'd say that's a very important thing too, knowing like I've had some friends where they just do everything and they like and then all of a sudden they crash and whenever you crash, everything suffers. So, the mentality that I think I take is yes, get yourself involved with a lot of things but also know your limits and make sure that you do have at least a little bit of time for yourself so that you're not overloaded.</p>
<p>Do not give up</p>	<p>If you keep trying, you can work through it.</p>	<p>Trevor: I'm strong spirited. I once I commit to something I commit and there is no really turning me around the other way unless the path is physically blocked.</p> <p>Phillip: I have never been able to give up on anything. I can't. I have to like I have to pursue something until it no longer reveals any benefits.</p>
<p>Be organized</p>	<p>By keeping your life in order, you can be more efficient and productive.</p>	<p>Emily: My brother over Christmas, he bought me a Passion Planner, like a fancy calendar. And it helped me...I use my phone...and I have it like kind of color-coordinated and like I have everything I have to do during the day and stuff. It's really nice because I could like input like people's birthdays and like schedule like lunch meetings.</p>
<p>Be open</p>	<p>By being open to new experiences, you can try some new things that might help you cope with a problem.</p>	<p>When she came back after winter break, Lynn said: We [my new friends and I] started hanging out more. They had been inviting me to things, but then I started kind of accepting like, 'oh yeah, I'll go to [dinner] with you guys or I'll go do this with you guys'...I was more open to saying yes to opportunities people were presenting me with.</p>
<p>"Get your grind on"</p>	<p>This coping strategy, coined by Trevor, refers to when you know what you need to do and so you just need to really focus on it and get it done.</p>	<p>When Trevor failed his exam, he talked about adjusting his studying techniques: I really stuck to it...I went to office hours...I did homework in groups and like I really put that grind on like in that course. It became the crux of my studying. Not to the extent that I was neglecting to everything else of course but to the extent that I really needed to hunker down and really take care of that class.</p>

Table 2 Continued

Rely on your previous experience	Sometimes to deal with new problems, you can use some of the skills that you already have developed.	Sam: I would say that I was studious but also not the most proactive person. So, like a lot of people in high school there, they just skim by to get As without trying. I was never that kind of student though. So, before coming to college I already had study skills built up.
Reflection	Reflecting on your experiences can be useful as you evaluate how to change/improve.	Trevor: It's that like I did have a nice and real honest reflection with myself after my first year. Every semester I do reflect a lot on what my things that happened and how I can do better and how I can change.
Breathe/Pause	This strategy to physically pause and take a deep breath is simple but can have a calming effect.	Brian: I actually had student come into the Advising Center the other day I just could tell she was entirely in that panic state and the first thing I told her was 'just take a breath,' because it's going to be fine.
Be independent	Make your own decisions.	Brian: I want to study Spanish. All of my relatives were like 'What are going to do with that? You can't do anything with just speaking Spanish!' So, their mindset was either, I was going to translate for the rest of my life, or I'm going to have no job. So, it kind of lit a fire just to prove them wrong.
Trust your instincts	By trusting your instincts, you listen to your inner voice and use that as a guide to know what to do.	Shelby: I would say go with your gut because you probably know whether this relationship can last or not. And then, if you don't think it can last, don't drag it out too long.
<i>Maladaptive Strategies</i>		
Non-Action	When none of the available options are desirable, one way to cope with the problem is to avoid any action.	Lynn had mental health challenges but she chose not to seek out counseling services. She knew that these resources existed, but did not feel as though she was the type of student who should be "using up resources" such as counseling services.
Partying/alcohol	Attending parties and consuming alcohol can provide a release for stress and is a way that some students described coping, despite the risks or consequences.	Trevor: I would go out and like I would drink a lot, like I would go out and I would drink to forget the exam.

4.2.6.2 Positive resilient self-talk

Though students described using many independent coping strategies, one commonly used independent technique is something that I am referring to as *positive resilient self-talk*. This is considered to be one of the positive coping strategies students employed. Because it was used so frequently throughout the interviews, in addition to being presented in Table two, the following section provides a more thorough explanation and analysis of the phenomenon.

Throughout the interviews, I began to notice a pattern when the participants would explain how they dealt with their challenges. In sharing their insight about the challenge, participants would reveal specific statements that they either said aloud or thought to themselves to help motivate them or give them confidence throughout the challenge. Some examples of resilient self-talk were statements such as “I can do this” or “Be honest with yourself”. Without prompting, six out of the ten participants described using some form of positive resilient self-talk to help them work through challenges. In describing their experiences with self-talk, none of the students described using negative statements in their self-talk which would have been identified as a maladaptive independent strategy. To clarify, negative self-talk (if it had been described by the students) might have included negatively-charged statements such as “I am not good enough” or “I am a failure.” The students’ descriptions of resilient self-talk are valuable because it gives an important glimpse into the internal dialogue of the student at the time of the challenge and demonstrates their tendency to think positive thoughts rather than negative thoughts. These statements also show us how the student may have internalized the stressful situation and gives clues as to how they made decisions on how to cope with those situations. Students primarily used positive resilient self-talk as a way to reassure themselves that everything will work out, as a way to remind themselves of good advice they have previously heard, or as a way to motive

themselves to take action. These three uses for resilient self-talk are illustrated in the following examples.

Resilient self-talk for reassurance

For some, this coping strategy was used as a way to reassure themselves. Students used resilient self-talk in this way to provide some comfort to themselves in difficult times. When they were in challenging situations, it was useful for them to rely on their inner voices which would provide a calming support. One example of this is from Alina who said, “But I feel like I addressed it rather well...saying, you know, ‘I accept any all of what may come throughout this.’” Another example came from Brian:

I made a friend group and I was doing fine, but then walking into a new group of people where everyone already knows each other and you have to be the one to go out of your way and like start making friends, just kind of really solidified that ‘I CAN do this and I CAN make friendships and just foster healthy relationships with whoever I need to.’

Brian used resilient self-talk in this instance to reassure himself that he is capable of making friends in any situation. This reassurance gave him some confidence to build relationships in his new environment. Brian also used resilient self-talk to reassure himself about his choice of academic major. In the following passage, he reveals how his internal dialogue about this issue has evolved over time. He said:

In high school, I picked up the mindset that ‘Anything I want to do, I can do it if I put my mind to it.’ And then in college, I kind of added the ‘And if it doesn’t happen the way I think it’s going to happen, it will still be okay.’

Brian used resilient self-talk as a way to reaffirm his beliefs that by pursuing his passion for languages, he will be able to create a fulfilling career and life for himself even if things do not always go his way. This reassurance provides him with comfort and courage to persist in the face of conflicting feelings from his family.

Lynn also provided an example of resilient self-talk used as a way to reassure herself that despite her current challenges, everything would be fine in the end. She says this to herself to give her some larger perspective about her current social challenges. She said:

I think graduating early honestly kind of helped me a little bit just in terms of thinking about ‘If I’m going to make friends, I’ve got to make them now. And, if I don’t make friends it’s only another year. So either way it’s going to work out.’

Though Lynn struggles to build social connections, she realizes that because she will graduate from college in just three years, this problem might only be temporary. She finds reassurance in her internal dialogue about this issue.

Resilient self-talk as a reminder

At times, resilient self-talk is used to *remind oneself* about a certain perspective or advice that is important to that individual. This strategy can help an individual to recall information that has been useful to them in the past in order to relate it to a current difficult situation. When the situation calls for the individual to make an important decision about how to proceed, their internal voice can guide them to make an appropriate decision based on past experiences that they have had.

Shelby provided a good example of using resilient self-talk to remind herself of the boundaries she needs from a friend she was close with during her first year in college. Shelby and her first-year friend have since discontinued their friendship and Shelby talked about how she struggled with that decision. She said, “I said to myself like, if ‘I don’t want to do it [hang out with my friend], it’s better just to say no than try to be good in a way and always say yes.’” Shelby knows that going against her instincts could result in pain as it has in the past and so she avoids that pain again by reminding herself to be true to what she wants.

Emily also provided an example of resilient self-talk as a reminder to herself. In her situation, Emily was thinking about the pressure she felt to enjoy college life and to take advantage of the many social situations that college students can experience. She said:

I think it's more like a cultural thing and just the college mentality of having a drink or like having to live a crazy lifestyle because now is your chance. It's like 'No, you have so much life ahead of you, like you don't have to be reckless,' basically.

Emily uses her resilient self-talk in this case to remind herself of her limits when it comes to risky behavior that could be fun. She reminds herself to focus on the future and make smart choices.

Resilient self-talk for motivation or encouragement to act

In addition to using resilient self-talk as reassurance or as a reminder, it can also be used for motivation or as encouragement to take action. In this sense, the internal dialogue serves as a way for the individual to muster the inspiration or courage that it takes to take a risk or make a difficult decision. Shelby talked about how she wanted to get involved as a mentor for international students on campus but was unsure of whether or not she could handle the challenge. As she contemplated this decision, she said to herself, 'Just do something. Like, in the beginning, you might not know if you like it or not. But just try. You can always quit the job if you don't like it.' By gathering her thoughts in this way, Shelby was able to take a risk knowing that she would be fine if it did not work out the way she expected.

Another student, Trevor, used resilient self-talk retroactively as he explained how he was feeling after scoring poorly on his honors physics exam. Although he wishes that he could give himself this advice in the past, he now uses this as a way to motivate himself to seek help in the future. Trevor said:

If I could tell myself something right before that second exam, I think I would have said like, ‘Hey you don’t know it [the exam material]– and you need to be honest with yourself that you don’t know it. You’re trying and maybe it’s not working, you need to seek out help ahead of time.’

In this passage, Trevor uses his past experiences as a reminder and a call to action to be more proactive in the future about seeking academic resources.

From the examples shared above, we can learn more about the ways that students talk to themselves throughout stressful situations or important decisions. Whether the self-talk is being used to reassure, remind, motivate, or as a call to action, this raw and honest inner dialogue provides clues as to how students process experiences. Throughout the process of member checking for this study, one interesting piece of feedback I received was from Brian who was specifically interested in learning that the resilient self-talk coping strategy was used by others as well. The participant shared that this strategy has been extremely important in his life and he was glad to learn that it was a legitimate coping strategy. It was interesting to see how this provided some validation for using this independent coping strategy, which would typically otherwise be a very private experience.

4.2.6.3 Dependent Coping Strategies

In addition to the many independent strategies that students described, there were also several strategies that relied on help from others, or dependent strategies. Though students described using independent coping strategies more frequently, the dependent strategies were the situations in which students used campus resources. Despite an apparent preference for solving a problem independently, most students admitted that eventually they needed to seek external support in order to navigate the challenge they were facing. Table 3 below provides an overview of the most commonly used dependent coping strategies. The students identified each of these

dependent coping strategies as being helpful or positive strategies, therefore, there are no maladaptive dependent strategies reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Dependent Coping Strategies

This table provides an overview of the most commonly cited dependent strategies employed by the participants and includes examples of how the participants described putting that strategy into action.

Dependent Coping Strategy	Description of Strategy	Example of Strategy in Action
Ask for help	Reaching out to others to ask for assistance.	Sam: And basically, going like reaching out for help was definitely the biggest thing that was beneficial in that situation because obviously, if you struggle internally with it, which is what you were doing before, nothing is going to change because it comes to a certain point where you can only do so much by yourself.
Find and utilize helpful resources	Students described many campus resources, groups, and organizations as being helpful to them in overcoming challenges.	Emily: Like I was happy that I was doing good in school...but then ultimately like deep down like I knew my family struggling, having to come to terms with my sister and all of her struggles, which made it very difficult for me to cope with it, I guess. I did a sign up for, for the counseling center and I went to a few individual therapy sessions. Some of the other resources used by participants were: faculty office hours, student clubs, the academic resource center, an academic learning community, and mentoring programs.
Get advice/ Talk to others	By reaching out to others, you can ask for their advice on what to do or for their help in solving the problem.	Brian: So much of my peer advising over the summer for the incoming students is just telling them that it's going to be fine and there are so many resources...and the advisors that are there for them and professors are all there to try to make them succeed. So, if they're willing to help themselves a little bit, everyone here is willing to help push them the rest of the way.

Table 3 Continued

Supportive Relationships	Student described receiving emotional support from many different relationships, including: parents, family members, friends, faculty, advisors, romantic partners, roommates, and God.	Alina: Adult life is scary, and you just don't really want it. And it's just, like a lot that just seems really confusing. I feel, like, I'm just really thankful to have my mom here to explain to me.
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The dependent coping strategies such as advising and resources were provided to students as services through the university. These examples highlight ways in which campus resources as well as relationships with faculty and advisors can be useful in supporting student resiliency.

4.3 HOW STUDENTS DESCRIBE LEARNING FROM STRESSFUL EXPERIENCES

Throughout the interviews, students described many different lessons that they had learned as a result of living through their stressful experiences. Most students seemed to be self-aware of the lessons that their challenges had taught them. It was clear some of them had discussed these topics previously with their friends, counselor, or parent, and so many of the responses were insightful and well thought-out. In addition, it was also interesting that the timing of the interviews seemed to be significant in how the students were able describe their learning. By interviewing sophomores and juniors who are now somewhat removed from the challenges of the first year, it was possible for them to talk about their experiences somewhat holistically by considering multiple perspectives. They often mentioned that in hindsight, they were able to see the situation a little more clearly. This has made it possible for them to justify or rationalize behaviors. In some cases, this hindsight has perhaps given them a greater ability to speak about

the positive outcomes rather than to focus on their mistakes or the negative outcomes. This section features an overview of how students describe their learning from stressful experiences including reflecting on their personal reflection and growth, realizing that some stress is ok and can lead to positive outcomes, realizing that there are still challenging times ahead, recognizing the power of sharing stories, and being aware of one's own uniqueness.

4.3.1 Personal reflection and growth

Several students described that they learned more about themselves as a result of working through the challenges that they faced. As they reflected on their challenging experiences, they were able to recognize how they had changed as a result of navigating through that experience and how it will help them handle similar situations in the future. In some cases, personal growth meant that students had further developed skills or traits that they believed helped them to be successful. For example, Sam believed that he gained further confidence in himself as a product of the experiences that he has had in college. Lynn learned that she genuinely enjoys spending time by herself and does not need to have a large group of friends to feel good about herself. As a practical example, Lynn also said she gained confidence as she learned to independently navigate the complexity of the city bus system which let her explore the area around the university's campus. These examples demonstrate how students learned to be more independent and self-reliant as a result of their challenges.

Upon reflection, students also described their personal growth as providing them with an expanded capacity for dealing with similar issues in the future. Brian developed a personal sense of pride that he did not previously have about himself as a result of how he chose his academic plan of studies. He said:

I didn't really realize how much that I did all myself because I always attributed it to like the history department is so great ...but like because I am the one that obsessively sat down with my schedule and looked at it all credits and kind of decided where to go...I cultivated that but I always attributed that to other people.

Brian's reflection on this experience helped him to understand his own role in navigating the challenge and made him proud of the way that he managed that situation. He recognizes that he has developed useful skills in managing his schedule and it has given him a sense of agency over his own goals that he did not experience before. These examples highlight a few of the ways in which participants reflected on their own personal growth and how they have developed after their first year in college.

4.3.2 Some stress is ok and can lead to positive outcomes

Although many students talked about their stressful experiences producing negative feelings (like worry or frustration), several students mentioned that their difficult experience actually led to some positive outcomes now that they look back on the situation. For example, Brian, who received an alcohol citation during his first week on campus, shared that the violation actually helped him to learn more about the university and also brought him closer to his new friends. He believes that if they had not gone through that stressful time together, than they might not be as close as they are today.

Similarly, Jacob shared that his parents divorced when he was a child, and although it was stressful at the time, he can see that it worked out better than he once thought it could. He said:

I, actually, kind of feel that I've benefitted way more than I've been harmed by my parents' divorce in the long run. And when you're a kid, it never seems like that. It's the end of your world. But that was definitely one of the better things in my life.

Looking back on the experience, Jacob realized that although his parent's divorce was stressful at the time, it created less conflict within his family and also gave him confidence in his ability to navigate future challenges in the long-term. Alina shared a related sentiment in that experiencing a limited amount of stress is ok and that it can even be helpful in bringing clarity to your thought process or giving you the impetus to make a decision. As she explained the stress related to finding a major she enjoyed, she said:

That's an important part. Like, as awful as stress is, like, sometimes - when it's not an anxiety attack - it can be, like helpful in trying to think about things.

Like Alina, Lynn shared that going through the stress involved in her first year of college was helpful for her growth overall. In Lynn's case, she believes that the challenges that she faced perhaps improved her mental health. Looking back on her college experience, Lynn said:

I don't know that my mental health would have gotten better in the same way that it did if I hadn't gone through college, just because I suddenly had to be responsible for myself... I kind of had to transition into helping myself or making my own decisions about what things to be involved with.

Lynn's example, as well as the previous passages, demonstrate how experiencing some stress can be helpful and possibly lead to positive outcomes.

4.3.3 Realization that challenging times are still ahead

Another lesson that students learned as a result of their stressful experiences is the realization and acceptance of the fact that the challenges that they faced during their first year in college are just some of many challenges that they will face throughout their education, careers, and lifetime. The perspective they have gained from previous challenges allows them to better prepare themselves for future challenges. Alina explained this in relation to her previously mentioned stressful situation caused by sleeping through an exam. After the experience, she put

the situation into perspective by understanding that she might face other similar situations again and although she cannot prepare for it, she has some new advice for herself that might help her in the future. Alina said:

If not like this, then something else like this will happen. And the important thing is, when it does happen, just try and figure out if there's any outcomes or solutions that you can go through. And just do your best in it and not give up too easily.

Like Alina, Brian had a similar learning experience from his challenge to make new friends in college. He realized that the need to make new friends is not a challenge that is exclusive to college, but rather a challenge that will be present again in his life any time that he takes on a new role or experience. Brian said:

The challenges that I feel like I faced freshmen year are things that are just going to keep popping up over and over throughout my life. Because just you're always going to have to show up in a new place with people you don't know.

Jimmy discussed his own related realization by contextualizing his college experience within the scope of his lifetime. He said: "I think it's very important just like for future-wise to be very mindful, you know. This is not the end of it. This is actually a means to an end. It's not just the end of it." With this simple but insightful passage, Jimmy explained a rather mature perspective in that he sees his college experience as just the beginning of a long career and a long life. By broadening his perspective in this way, his college problems and stress do not seem insurmountable, but rather, manageable. Instead, his college challenges are just some of many that he will experience. He tries to keep his focus on the long run, rather than the barriers he faces along the way. This seems to be an effective mindset to manage stressful situations that can, at times, seem overwhelming. By keeping this perspective in mind, Alina, Brian, and Jimmy are able to think about the bigger picture and prepare themselves for future challenges.

4.3.4 Power of sharing stories

In their interviews, several of the participants at some point talked about the power of sharing stories of resilience with others. Many of the students personally benefited from their peers sharing stories of resilience with them. The sharing of stories was seen as resource and as a guide cope with difficulties that they experienced. One of the outcomes of listening to their peers' stories of resiliency is that students realized that they were not alone in their struggle and that many students are experiencing the same challenges. In some cases, students listened to stories but did not heed the advice. Only by reflecting back on those experiences were students able to recognize the value and the power that those stories could have. Additionally, as a result of facing these challenging situations, many of the students were motivated to share their own stories with others through an on-campus peer mentoring or advising position. Their desire to help others by sharing their own stories indicates that they understand how powerful this process can be.

From talking with others, Lynn learned that her struggle to find friends in her first semester of college was a struggle that in reality many of the people around her were also experiencing. She said:

A lot of people I actually talked to after the fact about first semester also said they felt the same way, which is interesting to me. They all seemed like they were so outgoing but they also kind of like felt similar things in terms of like what was expected.

By learning that she was not alone in her struggle, Lynn was able to feel less stress and adjust some of the original expectations that she had created for herself in terms of her new social network.

In contrast to Lynn's experience, Trevor talked about the importance of sharing stories by explaining how he personally did *not* take the advice of others into consideration. Though more advanced students told him several times that his first semester would be difficult, he did not believe it until he himself experienced difficulty in his first semester with his honors physics class. Trevor said:

I think a lot of students who come in underestimate the difficulty of college. I kind of heard like ad nauseam this idea that people *think* they are prepared and so they don't take that seriously. They don't take kind of claims of people who are older than them...And I would say probably a really big struggle for me my first semester was that idea that it was going to be easy.

Though Trevor saw himself as an exception and did not take the advice of others in this situation, he recognized how powerful it can be to learn from others who have been in similar situations. Perhaps he will take the perspectives of others more seriously in the future as a result of this experience.

The process of learning from others' experiences has been so helpful to these participants that many of these students have since taken on formal mentoring or peer advising roles within the university community. For example, Brian is a peer academic advisor, Trevor is a resident assistant, and Shelby is a peer mentor for new international students. Shelby explained how she talks with new international students about how to make friends in the United States:

I share my own stories to make more connections with them. And then, maybe, through my own story, they can find something useful. Or, like, maybe find something not so useful.

Now as a resident assistant, Trevor is able to use his own story of not heeding the advice of others to motivate the residents on his floor. He said:

You climb the mountain and you look back and you see where you've climbed from, right? And you are still going up but you see that you've come so far. And there are still those people who are at the base who don't realize where they are at and how far they have to go because it's so cloudy up above. And so, what I think my mission is overall is like... I tell them it's possible. I've done it, I've

done it in a very difficult major and if I can do it, you can do it, because all I needed was my motivation.

Using this mountain-climbing metaphor, Trevor recognizes that his own mistakes and successes can be a learning tool for others. He sees it as his responsibility to help others see through the clouds. By sharing his stories, Trevor is able to paint a picture of what is ahead for other students so that they can use that to inform their navigation of their own challenges. Trevor's work as a resident assistant allows him to do this for first year residents. By pursuing and serving in this role, Trevor demonstrates his belief in the significance of sharing stories. The process of sharing stories can be very powerful and is an important lesson that has been learned by many of the participants.

4.3.5 Awareness of experience in comparison to others

Throughout the interviews, there were several examples of how participants think about or do not think about themselves in relation to other people (mostly their peers). One prevalent perspective that emerged was that the participants think that they are fundamentally unique and that the experiences that they have are dissimilar to the experiences other people have. Some students said that they have different attributes than their peers, they think differently than their peers, and also want different things than their peers. In the interviews, these statements were frequently presented as deep, ingrained beliefs. This is something that they know to be true without question. Because this belief is the foundation of their reality, students were sometimes surprised when they learned later on that their experiences were actually quite similar to other students' experiences. During challenging times, the belief that their experiences were unique sometimes created feelings of isolation and served as an obstacle for students to seek the help

that they needed. It can become problematic when high-achieving students do not believe that the same advice, resources, and support that other students use could be useful for them because it can create a barrier between the student and the resource or service they may need. Because the participants in this study saw themselves as different than their peers, they did not believe that the same advice, resources, or support applied to their unique and particular situation. It is only upon later reflection of the experiences, they were more aware of the similarity of their experiences in relation to others and therefore more open to the advice of others on that topic. Though the students in this study perceived themselves to be unique from their counterparts, this mindset is not limited to high-achieving students. The idea that college students think of themselves as unique or special has been identified as a common trait within the current generation of college students in the United States (Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile, 2011) as well as attributed as product of youth (Roll, 2017). Though this perception is not limited to high-achieving students, it is discussed further in this section as it was a prevalent finding in the current study.

Among the students who thought that they were unique, many shared the perception that they were more academically driven than their peers. For some of the students who struggled academically in their first year, they became frustrated when they were no longer a top performer in their class. This caused discomfort and confusion as to how they could be more driven than their peers and yet not performing as strongly as other students. This incongruence was further complicated with further academic problems for the students when they did not seek help in understanding the class material, believing instead that they would be able to figure it out on their own if they just tried hard enough. Sometimes students were successful with this independent strategy but sometimes it just delayed their ability to seeking external help.

There were also a few students who thought that they had other unique attributes that set them apart from their peers. One example of this is with Jacob, the commuter student. Jacob thinks that he is more mature than other students his age because of the extra responsibility that comes along with managing his commute and his demanding work schedule. Jacob also believes that he is more intelligent than his peers because he notices that he thinks differently than many students in his classes. He processes information extremely logically and without much empathy which he believes sets him apart as a student. As another example, Phillip thinks he is more physically attractive than many of his friends. He thinks that his physical attributes have made him more approachable and this has helped him to make new friends more easily in college as opposed to some of his peers who are not as good-looking. In addition to his physical attributes, Phillip also gave an example of how he believes that his preferences make him different than his peers. In his interview, Phillip said:

I think that I want other things...I do not like using my cellphone very much. I do not like watching TV very much. I have a very physical nature, I like doing things with my hands, but then I also really enjoy reading and learning, so I feel like I am 40 years older than most people at college...So I think in those ways I feel different. But I am not in any way saying there is any sort of hierarchy in me saying that. I do not think I am above anyone, I just think that I have different interests to the extent where it seems to make a large difference just in general life.

In Phillip's example, he reported these unique qualities in a matter-of-fact kind of way rather than with the intent of being arrogant. He sees himself as being different than others which sets him apart from his peer group.

Because these students believe that they are unique, they are somewhat surprised by the fact that sometimes their experiences are similar to others. For example, in her mental health struggles, Lynn talked about her complicated decision to not seek counseling services despite fully knowing that those resources were available to her. In this next passage, she talks about

learning about how the social transition to college might be difficult prior to college. Although she was told that this could be a challenge, she still firmly believes that she is the only person who was not making quality social connections during her first semester. Because she perceives herself as an exception, she chooses to avoid counseling services or other forms of help for her mental health issues. Lynn said:

There's a lot of talk like about how it's difficult like transition socially but at the same time – you don't want to take advantage of resources like counseling and stuff when you are just starting out and you don't want to like feel that stigma around it... So it's like [the University of Pittsburgh] offers a lot of resources but it's really hard to take advantage of them when you feel like you are the only one feeling the way you are feeling.

Later in her interview, Lynn talked about discovering that others were dealing with similar challenges when it came to making new friends and socially transitioning to college. In a way, her belief that her specific experiences were special and unique created a barrier for her to make friends and to seek help.

4.4 RESILIENCY AND FAILURE

Throughout the exploration of how students describe stressful experiences, how they cope with those experiences, and how they describe learning from those experiences, students shared their perspectives about the concepts of resiliency and failure. The following section provides an overview of multiple definitions and conceptualizations of resiliency and failure as well as an analysis of how students do or do not identify with these terms.

4.4.1 Defining resiliency

When asked to explain what resiliency means to them, the participants provided several definitions, metaphors, and examples. These descriptions can provide insight into how students understand the complexity of this phenomenon. Among the responses, there were a few that stood out as particularly astute. The students' definitions of resiliency fell into two major categories – one is that being resilient is being self-reliant and the other is that being resilient is like being persistent.

According to some participants, being resilient is comparable to being independent and self-reliant. These students explained that resiliency is a function of self-sufficiency. In this school of thought, students rely on their own skills and abilities to carry themselves through the challenge. Students who subscribe to this idea of resiliency are self-regulating and mostly use the independent coping strategies rather than the dependent strategies. To be resilient, one must be able to push oneself through the challenge.

Other students presented a definition of resiliency that is more aligned with the concept of perseverance. This category recognizes that it takes courage and commitment in order to work through a problem. These definitions present resiliency as a process by which difficult situations are resolved. For the students who subscribe to this school of thought, it is not just the student's personal attributes that will carry them through the challenge, but rather their unwavering belief that they need to persist despite challenging circumstances. Table four, below, provides examples of each of these categorizations of resiliency.

Table 4. Definitions of Resiliency

This table provides examples of how participants define resiliency as being self-reliance versus perseverance.

Definitions and Examples of Resiliency	
<i>Participants' Definitions of Resiliency</i>	<i>Examples from Participants</i>
Resiliency as self-reliance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resiliency is finding something that you believe in or having core beliefs and kind of sticking to your guns. • Resiliency is finding the coping mechanism that's the healthiest for you. • Resiliency is taking complete ownership and agency... Being resilient is saying like, 'I have these resources here at my disposal but they are not going to dispose of themselves for me. I have to actually seek those out and if I need help, it's okay to ask for help,' but eventually your cries for help need to be internalized, need to come full circle, come back to themselves and say, 'at the end of the day, I am the person who's going to help me.'
Resiliency as perseverance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resiliency is being able to stand back up when you are down in a way and be more flexible. Like, not letting one thing take you down. • Resiliency is a process you learn and go through. You fail at some things [like losing a friend]. And that's also how you make another [friend]. • Resiliency is like a person being hit down and getting back up again. It's like a boxer...It's very, very important like in athletics... If you aren't resilient, you never really improve yourself. • Resiliency is sort of in line with perseverance. I think that it is finding the good and the bad and working through things and pressing yourself and understanding that nothing is ever going to work out just how you want it. There is no perfect scenario. There is no Hollywood scene. Nothing like that exists. So just really, really working at things until they function for you and doing everything to the best of your ability. • Resiliency is the same thing as perseverance. I'd say it's not giving up even in tough situations. If you fall, you pick yourself back up and try again and now you have a new experience to help you better conquer that problem. • Resiliency is this awareness of what is coming your way and your knowledge of whether or not you can withstand what's coming or if you need to get out of way.

Table four provides examples of how participants defined resiliency in two categories. With these definitions of both resiliency as self-reliance and resiliency as perseverance, the students indicate that they understand that resiliency is not a simple or easy process. They see it as messy, complicated, and sometimes painful. However, they describe it as being a necessary process in order to achieve their goals.

4.4.2 Failure

Because many of the students described failure as a necessary part of their resilience, it is worth exploring the concept of failure and its relationship to resiliency. Some students recognized failure as being a part of their challenging experiences, however, failure did not necessarily define those experiences. For example, Trevor considered his low score on his exam to be a failure. Similarly, Alina considered missing her exam as a mistake. However, none of the students labeled or identified their overall challenges as being failures. With these examples, despite their shortcomings, neither Trevor nor Alina considered their overall experience in those classes to be a failure. They did not necessarily earn the high grades they initially wanted, but they both said that they learned a lot from the experience. Thus, their justification for this is that as long as they learned something from the challenging experience, it was worth it and cannot accurately be labeled as a failure. In other words, any partial failure they experience is just considered to be one natural part of the resiliency process.

Throughout the interviews, students frequently described their challenges as experiences from which they have learned. What is particularly interesting is not the context of the challenging situation (academics, finding friends, etc.) but rather the formulaic presentation of how they talk about the experience. As students explained a challenging situation, they were

quick to immediately reassure me that it was not so bad, that they have already thought of a solution, that they had already resolved the problem, or most importantly, that they had truly learned from the experience. Throughout the interviews, I wondered why the participants felt the need to reassure me that they had not actually failed. Even retroactively, it was difficult for some students to admit that they needed help and that there were circumstances that, despite their best efforts, were out of their control. Understandably, it seemed to be very uncomfortable for students to explain the painful or embarrassing moments of their experiences. Perhaps the desire to avoid these painful emotions created opportunity for students to reframe their experiences as something that was helpful or useful to them. To illustrate this idea of reframing experiences, the following passage from Phillip's interview exemplifies how he believes that failures are just a part of learning. He said:

I think failure is not something I have really experienced in college, which is probably a huge learning curve I am missing out on because I think failure is really, really important... When I think of the word failure, I think of trial and error...the small failures turned into some level of knowledge or skill.

As evidenced by this passage, not many challenges are considered to be true failures. Phillip, like several other participants, sees failure and learning as one process that cannot be separated. To truly fail at something, then, would only happen if they did not learn anything from the process or if they gave up without putting forth their best effort. The idea that "as long as you learned something, it was worth it" is a powerful narrative that was repeated again and again throughout the interviews.

4.4.3 Using “resilient” as a personal descriptor

A final interesting finding is related to the different ways in which students described themselves as being resilient. Throughout the interviews, it became clear that students have varying levels of comfort using the word “resilient” to describe themselves. While some students say they are definitely resilient, other students are not sure that the label “resilient” describes them. Additionally, there were also students who say they think they are resilient but ultimately showed some hesitancy in using this label. Others still declined to answer as they determined they were not sure exactly what it meant to be resilient. One participant, Lynn, expressed her thoughts on if she would use “resilient” to describe herself:

I don't know. It's a kind of hard question, I guess. I'm not always the most resilient person but I feel like everybody kind of has to be resilient in order to just live because otherwise, I mean, everybody would just end up not doing anything.

Taking ownership of the word “resilient” as a personal descriptor is not something that every student was comfortable doing. It is possible that some participants were hesitant to claim that they are resilient people in the same way that they might hesitate to admit failure. Taking a middle-of-the-road approach is a much safer strategy.

This finding is important because it suggests a disconnection between how students describe themselves and how higher education professionals describe this phenomenon. Because the descriptor “resilient” may be somewhat unfamiliar terminology, higher education professionals should use this word with caution. As many participants did not really identify with the word “resilient”, it might be challenging to engage with students if this terminology is used. More research is needed to explore this aspect of the phenomenon in greater depth.

The findings described in this chapter revealed the ways in which high-achieving students conceptualize resiliency as well as how they think about failure. The phenomenological design

of this study was helpful in capturing the lived experience of high-achieving students during their first year of college by providing rich descriptions of how students experienced challenge, how they coped with challenges, and how they learned from those experiences are useful in highlighting the participants' experiences in detail. Chapter five summarizes the major findings from this study and also includes a discussion of implications for practice.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 CONCLUSIONS OF KEY FINDINGS

By exploring the phenomenon of how high-achieving students experience resiliency in their first year of college, it is possible to develop a greater understanding of how these students persist in spite of the obstacles that they face. In analyzing the three research questions for this study, more can be learned about the students' lived experiences with regard to how they describe stressful times, how they describe coping, and how they describe their learning as a result of those experiences. In addition, the data also revealed conceptualizations of resiliency and failure in a way that reveal students' attitudes around failure as being a part of their learning process. From this analysis, it is possible to determine a few key findings, implications for practice, as well as limitations and recommendations for future research. The key findings below are organized in response to the three major research question that guided this study.

5.1.1 High-achieving students experience a variety of stressful experiences

Research question one asked: How do high-achieving students describe stressful experiences from their first year of college? Findings from this study suggest that high-achieving students describe experiencing many types of stress and challenges in their first year. Educators may often mistakenly assume that high-achieving students do not face difficulties in college because

they typically excel academically (Dougherty, 2007). However, all of the high-achieving students in this study's sample indicated that they struggled with several aspects of their first year transition to college. The participants in this study faced a variety of challenges including academic challenges, social challenges, challenges with deciding on an academic plan of study, health challenges, and pressure to succeed during their first year in college. Though academic setbacks did not necessarily derail their overall academic plan of study or ruin their GPA, their resiliency was tested in many ways. The experiences that they faced were the source of much stress, anxiety, frustration, and worry during their first year, especially for those students who were facing an academic or social challenge for the first time in their lives. Findings from this study were consistent with previous research which suggests high levels of anxiety often result from high-achieving students' academic pursuits as they strive to meet high standards and compete with their peers (Dougherty, 2007). As they struggled with academic challenges, several students also cited feelings of disbelief as they realized a disconnection between their own perception of their abilities and the new reality in which they were underperforming. When these students faced an obstacle, it challenged their own fundamental assumptions about themselves and their abilities.

Though first year student challenges have been the focus of much research in higher education (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005) the phenomenological approach to this study has been especially useful illuminating the individual stories of challenge that are not often heard from high-achieving students specifically in the way that these students perceive themselves and their challenges. The detailed recollections provided in this study show the complexity of students' experiences and conceptualizations of resiliency. The individual stories that are

highlighted in this study provide a level of depth to this phenomenon that could not otherwise have been gathered through survey data or other quantitative methods.

The findings from this study suggests that these high-achieving students perceive themselves as having unique challenges that cause them to experience stress differently than their average or low-achieving counterparts. For instance, because they perceive themselves as seeking a higher academic standard than their peers, high-achieving students may experience academic difficulties that do not even appear on the radar of a faculty member or academic advisor. One example that illustrates this point is Trevor's academic struggle. Trevor earned a D grade on one exam but overall earned a B grade in his class. From Trevor's perspective, earning that D grade was one of the most stressful experiences of his first year in college and it profoundly challenged his own perception of his academic abilities. However, it is likely that his professor or advisor did not even notice this as having been a problematic semester for Trevor because of his overall positive outcome. The critical point here is that Trevor's success in this instance was not an accident. Although Trevor figured out how to change his strategies and expectations to work through the challenge, it is dangerous to assume that all high-achieving students can navigate through their challenges independently as not all high-achieving students have the skills to be able to manage this. High-achieving student stress and challenges may be undetected by those who may be in a position to offer help or resources. This suggests a need for educators to listen more carefully to the specific ways that high-achieving students describe experiencing challenges and to also be aware that high-achieving students may perceive their own struggle differently than their peers.

5.1.2 Coping with stressful experiences

Research question two asked: How do high-achieving students describe coping with stressful experiences in their first year of college? The participants in this study provided many examples of coping strategies that they used to help address the challenges they experienced in their first year. Though most strategies were considered to be positive or healthy strategies, there were a few that were described by the students as maladaptive, or in other words, strategies that were unhealthy or inappropriate for navigating the challenge. Among the positive strategies, resilient self-talk was commonly used by participants as a way to reassure, remind, and motivate themselves. There is evidence that self-talk is a technique that can be useful in promoting resiliency in college students (Meyer, Licklider, & Wiersema, 2009). However, the findings from this current study build upon prior research in this area by demonstrating that the participants depended upon *positive resilient* self-talk (positive statements rather than negative statements) for the purpose of encouraging themselves to be resilient throughout the challenge they experienced.

In addition, students described both independent and dependent coping strategies as being useful but indicated a preference for using independent strategies. Prior research suggests that personal coping skills as well as supportive relationships and environments are important for resiliency in difficult times (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). However, the high-achieving students in this study were more inclined to use independent coping strategies, suggesting that they were more likely to first try to solve a problem themselves than to seek outside resources such as advising, campus services, or support from their relationships. This finding is significant because it indicates that the high-achieving students in this study know about the support and resources that are available to them and yet they may perceive a barrier to these resources based

on their expectation that they should be independent and able to handle the issues themselves. This attitude reinforces previous research that suggests students who experience an academic challenge may recognize a need to improve their own attitudes and behaviors in order to combat underachievement (Balduf, 2009). Given the expectations that come along with their status as high-achieving students, they do not feel as though they are the type of students who need to ask for assistance.

One example that highlights this phenomenon is Lynn's story and her challenges with her mental health during her first year. Though she was well aware of the counseling services that the university provided, she did not feel as though she was the type of person who should be accessing these resources and therefore did not seek help. The high expectations to succeed may prevent high-achieving students from accessing existing campus resources and therefore prevent them from using the dependent coping strategies that may be useful to their resiliency.

5.1.3 Learning from stressful experiences

Research question three asked: How do high achieving students describe their learning from stressful experiences in their first year of college? The high-achieving students in this study described many lessons that they have learned from their challenging experiences. By reflecting on their challenging experiences, they recognized how they had changed or grown as a result of navigating through that experience and how it will help them handle similar situations in the future. The students were also able to recognize how difficult experiences sometimes helped to produce positive outcomes and so their experiences helped them to realize that embracing some stress can be helpful. In addition, students said that they realized that they would face challenging times again in the future and so they believed that they would be better prepared for

those future experiences given their resiliency in their first year. Students also valued the opportunity to share stories of resilience with others and recognized the power of learning from others' experiences. Storytelling can serve as a way for students to check for their own understanding of the situation and also as a way to measure their growth (Meyer, Licklider, & Wiersema, 2009). Throughout their interviews, the students also made it clear that they perceived their experiences to be unique. Upon later reflection of the experiences, however, they were more aware of how their experiences were similar to others.

Though the students described learning many lessons, a key finding was in the way that students perceive their mistakes or setbacks as learning opportunities rather than as failures. This attitude was prevalent among the participants. This finding is significant because it suggests that high-achieving students may have an aversion to the concept of failure. They have reframed their past challenges as learning opportunities and thus have reimagined a world in which they cannot fail. Instead, failure and learning co-exist as one process where one cannot exist without the other.

5.2 IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This study may provide some useful suggestions for educators, higher educational leaders, student affairs professionals, and others who work with high-achieving students in a higher education setting. With limited resources, higher education leaders and educators have many difficult decisions to make about how to allocate resources and prioritize issues on their campuses. The decision to prioritize high-achieving student needs could be challenging when there are many other students at the institution who are at-risk and competing for the same

resources. However, this study may provide an impetus for educators to look more closely at the struggle that high-achieving students face in their first year of college, especially with regard to academic, social, and health challenges. Being more perceptive to high-achieving student experiences may encourage educators to take a more discerning view and see beyond retention as a measure of success. Educators should practice strategies that encourage high-achieving students to *thrive* academically and socially (Schreiner, 2010), rather than accepting survival as the ultimate goal. It is important for educators to understand that the mission to help students meet their full potential will be different for every individual student. High-achieving students will require strong individualized advising as well as proactive opportunities to develop coping strategies. Moving beyond retention as the ultimate success may be seen as a luxury by some but it is a strategy that will help propel high-achieving students to meet the high expectations that they have for themselves and to act ambitiously throughout their college experience. The specific recommendations from this study to improve first year resiliency for high-achieving students include dispelling the myth that high-achieving students do not face challenges, applying an individualized approach to advising high-achieving students, and creating opportunities to share stories of resilience and to teach resilient behaviors. By investing in these resources, educators can provide comprehensive support for high-achieving students throughout their transition to college.

5.2.1 Dispel the myth that high-achieving students do not experience stress of challenges

As indicated by the findings of this study, the idea that high-achieving students do not need institutional support is simply not accurate. Though some educators assume high-achieving students do not face significant challenges because they typically perform strongly academically,

this assumption is not supported by the literature about high-achieving students (Dougherty, 2007). Additionally, the findings from this study also do not support this assumption and, in fact, provide strong evidence to the contrary. Educators need to become more aware of the individual needs and characteristics of high-achieving students on their campus in order to dispel the myth that high-achieving students do not face challenges. If educators avoid making these assumptions, it is possible to create opportunities for high-achieving students to not only survive, but rather, thrive intellectually, socially, and emotionally in college (Schreiner, 2010). To this end, higher education institutions should consider the following recommendations:

- Support high quality academic advising, academic support services, and career advising based on unique needs of high achieving students.
- Provide high quality and comprehensive health services including counseling services and work to increase accessibility of services and reduce stigma around mental health on campus.

5.2.2 Apply an individualized approach to advising high-achieving students

Because high-achieving students have needs that are different than other students' (Dougherty, 2007), it is important to promote advising strategies that meet their specific needs and to adequately train advisors to be able to effectively implement these strategies. Participants in this study had a strong awareness of their perceived uniqueness from their peers (either in their abilities, motivation, or their goals). Because many participants saw themselves as having unique experiences, they may not find a generic advising meeting format or relationship to satisfy their advising needs. As an example, high-achieving students who are talented in many academic areas and are unsure of what major to pursue would benefit from early advising that is

attuned to this specific situation that is unique to high-achieving students (Fredrickson, 1979). Advisors of high-achieving student must also be knowledgeable of the many opportunities available to these students and also have the sensitivity to support them as they engage with those opportunities (Schwartz, 2006). High-achieving students can benefit from a wide range of referrals (Schwartz, 2006) and so it is important for advisors to be prepared with information and provide connections to campus services and faculty that can help students accomplish their goals.

Advisors and educators should promote advising approaches that are flexible enough to shape advising based on the individual's circumstances. Providing services that promote individualized attention rather than a one-size-fits-all approach will allow educators to accommodate the unique needs of high-achieving students. This may include increased opportunities for high-achieving students to meet one-on-one with advisors. However, as this may be cost-prohibitive in terms of time and resources, it is possible for advisors to apply targeted strategies to best capitalize on the limited interactions that they have with students. One approach may be to help teach students about independent coping strategies that they may use on their own when they experience a challenge. Advisors should be aware that some high-achieving students may demonstrate a preference for independent coping strategies, and so the role of the advisor may be to encourage use of dependent resources when they are needed.

To provide more specialized and individual advising to high-achieving students, educators should:

- Promote advising approaches that can be shaped based on the needs of the individual.
- Train advisors to be knowledgeable about the specific needs of high-achieving students and the opportunities from which they may benefit.

- Promote and encourage independent and dependent coping strategies so that high-achieving students may be better equipped to face challenges.

5.2.3 Create opportunities to share stories of resilience and teach resilient behaviors

Findings from this study support the idea that sharing stories of resilience with high-achieving students can be effective. First, several participants reported using dependent coping strategies such as asking for help, getting advice, and relying on supportive relationships. These strategies helped the students learn from others' experiences and prepare for certain common situations, and also gave them perspective when facing a difficult decision. Secondly, one of the most commonly cited first year challenges from the participants in this study was the ability to create and maintain quality social relationships. High-achieving college students can especially struggle with creating peer relationships (Gerrity, Lawrence, & Sedlacek, 1993). By creating dedicated time and space to promote the sharing of stories, educators can not only help students through their own struggles, but also help students interact more meaningfully with their peers. One of the ways that educators can help high-achieving students share their stories of resiliency is to:

- Create interventions that include teaching and reflection of resilient behaviors.

These interventions can take the form of resiliency development workshops, classes, or other interactive programming where students have a chance to assess themselves and practice or learn new skills for managing stressful situations in social and academic settings.

Though evidence suggests that the use of storytelling as a teaching strategy in a classroom setting can be effective in teaching about the concept of resiliency (Meyer, Licklider,

& Wiersema, 2009), educators should take the opportunity to use this strategy outside the classroom as well. One way that educators can do this is to:

- Create opportunities where students can naturally share stories of resilience with one another through peer mentoring and advising opportunities.

The participants in this study showed a great willingness to mentor new students. Educators can capitalize on this motivation by creating mentoring opportunities and by encouraging high-achieving students to serve in peer mentor or peer advising roles on campus. Peer mentoring or advising provides an environment for dependent coping strategies, such as sharing resources and relying on supportive relationships, to occur. Additionally, these types of interactions can also promote opportunities to help students learn about independent coping strategies from one another. Peer interactions can challenge students to think how they might be similar to others and encourage them to seriously consider the perspectives of peer mentors and advisors.

5.2.4 Implications for my practice

This research has given me an opportunity to reflect upon my own experience as an advisor as well as the personal implications that these findings have for my practice. As a result of what I have learned from this study, I can improve my practice in three areas. These areas include how I interact with individual students, how I design experiences for groups of students I advise, and how I can apply what I have learned in a professional setting with other advisors and colleagues.

On an individual level, I can be more empathic moving forward with my advising of high-achieving students now that I have a better understanding of the complexity of the

challenges and the high expectations that they may face in their first year. I will take opportunities to talk with high-achieving students about their own individual needs and also encourage them to embrace challenges smartly. A part of my advising strategy will be to challenge students to think about the source of their expectations and if those expectations are realistic for them. As their advisor, I can help to contextualize their experiences and inform them about common challenges that high-achieving students tend to face. When they struggle with a challenge, I can be supportive and coach them to see the learning opportunities that result from stress. Additionally, I will share the importance of exploring many different academic options and help students to thoughtfully narrow their choices by making informed decisions about their future.

As an advisor, I can also capitalize on the opportunities for my advisees to share stories of resilience with one another. I can design group advising meetings to focus on teaching independent and dependent coping strategies. These meetings may also be an opportunity to normalize challenges and have students share coping strategies that have been useful for them. In my role, I can also match new students with more advanced students as their mentors. In particular, I can encourage students to use resilient self-talk by asking them to practice this as a coping strategy or to have them write a letter or encouragement to themselves during a difficult time.

As a result of this study, I will also be able to share resources and coach other educators about the experiences of high-achieving students. I can work with my colleagues to design collaborative partnerships that will help to identify the needs of high-achieving students and provide more targeted services that are appropriate to their needs. In my professional role, I can

advocate for high-achieving students by leading the conversation on how these students may experience resiliency in their first year of college.

5.3 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Though the findings from this study help to fill a gap in the literature about how high-achieving students experience resiliency in their first year of college, additional research is needed in order to see if the findings are more widely applicable within a broader sample. Both the setting and the scope of this study were limitations. First, because this study took place at one institution during a limited amount of time, it is not possible to generalize the findings from this study to other contexts. Secondly, there are limitations due to the sample of participants in this study. Students in this study were invited to participate based on their eligibility and then self-selected to participate. There may be certain characteristics about students who are willing to participate that may differentiate them from their peers who were not willing to participate, however, this study cannot conclude that is the case. Further, because this sample only included students who are considered to be academically high-achieving, it is not possible to draw conclusions about how this group of students may compare to their average or low-achieving peers. It would be helpful to create a comparison study to assess the challenges and behaviors of both groups.

There are also opportunities for future research to focus on specific populations. For example, it might be helpful to look at students' experiences with resiliency in specific academic fields of interest (for example, pre-medicine, business, or the humanities). Additionally, though maximum variation sampling was employed, the majority of participants in this study were white and male and so additional research is needed to determine the specific needs of students with

other social identities such as students of color, female students, students with varying levels of socioeconomic status, or students with LGBTQIA+ identities. Additionally, as the context and sample of this study was limited, it is necessary to explore how a variety of other factors can influence a high-achieving student's experience such as institutional type, institutional size, student population, and availability of campus resources. It is important consider these limitations when applying recommendations for practice.

One strength of this study is the chosen method and the hermeneutic phenomenological approach. By interviewing high-achieving students in a one-on-one setting, it is possible to learn how students perceive and describe their experiences in greater detail. Although institutional and national data can be helpful for benchmarking and understanding student needs broadly, the qualitative method employed in this study adds a level of depth to this discussion that could not otherwise have been discovered through survey data. For example, the experience of disbelief that some students described after facing a challenge was prevalent for many, though the context and descriptions may have varied between individuals. These rich descriptions and connections help to capture specific information that can inform educators' practice as they support high-achieving students. Qualitative methods of inquiry should be a critical part of enhancing professional practice as it relates to high-achieving students. Future qualitative research in this area can contribute to a continuous improvement strategy that may be accomplished within a particular institution.

5.4 DEMONSTRATION OF PRACTICE

To demonstrate my learning in practice, I will take several opportunities to share my work with other educators and colleagues. These opportunities include presenting at the CGSE (Council of Graduate Students in Education) Poster session, giving a research talk with my department, and presenting at national conferences. These opportunities will enable me to inform other educators who advise high-achieving students and to contribute to the discussion on best practices for this group of students on both a local and national level.

Though most of these opportunities will take place after the defense of this dissertation, one of my demonstrations of practice has already occurred as I presented this Dissertation of Practice as a poster at the CGSE Poster Session and Reception on March 29, 2018 from 5:30-7:30pm in the O'Hara Student Center Ballroom. My advisor approved this presentation as a completion of the requirement for the EdD Demonstration of Practice. During the poster presentation, I shared my preliminary findings from this research and provided practical recommendations for conference attendees including higher education practitioners (advisors, staff, etc.) who work with high-achieving students. The purpose of sharing my findings is to help stakeholders implement interventions to help their students build resilient behaviors and coping strategies. Because of the nature of the research design, the poster included direct quotes to represent the student point of view so that conference attendees could experience what students say is helpful in building their resilient behaviors.

During the CGSE conference, I spoke with several professionals who expressed an interest in my research design and in my findings. There were several graduate students in attendance who were interested to know about the design of the study such as how I had selected my sample and how I had decided on my interview protocol. As the attendees reviewed my

preliminary findings, several commented that they also work with high-achieving students and had noticed that the challenges identified in this study were also similar to the challenges that they noticed in their own students or advisees. Many people that I talked with were especially interested in the independent coping strategies that students utilized. I learned that many people were self-reflective and recognized that they, as a graduate student or professional, had personally used several of these strategies frequently in their own lives. Several people also reminisced about themselves as a first year college student and the challenges that they faced. One attendee mentioned that she recognized these challenges and behaviors in her daughter. It was helpful and validating to speak with others about my preliminary findings. Many people expressed an appreciation for the research topic saying it was one that they noticed quite a bit in practice but had not seen a lot of research on the topic. Overall, the conference was a good opportunity to share my findings with others in the academic and professional community.

In addition to my CGSE conference presentation, I also intend to present my findings in the future to audiences at the University of Pittsburgh as well as to national audiences. I will give a research talk with my department in the Office of Cross Cultural and Leadership Development as this topic may be of interest to many of my immediate colleagues. In addition to the colleagues in my department, I will also invite colleagues to the presentation from across Student Affairs and the University who work with high-achieving students such as academic advisors, career advisors, and advisors in the Honors College. This presentation will serve as an opportunity for educators at the University of Pittsburgh to raise awareness of high-achieving student needs and to discuss implications for practice. Beyond the University of Pittsburgh, I will also submit proposals to present my research to national audiences in the 2018-2019 national conference cycle. Specifically, I will submit proposals to present educational sessions at the

ACPA national convention, the NASPA national convention, and the annual conference on The First Year Experience.

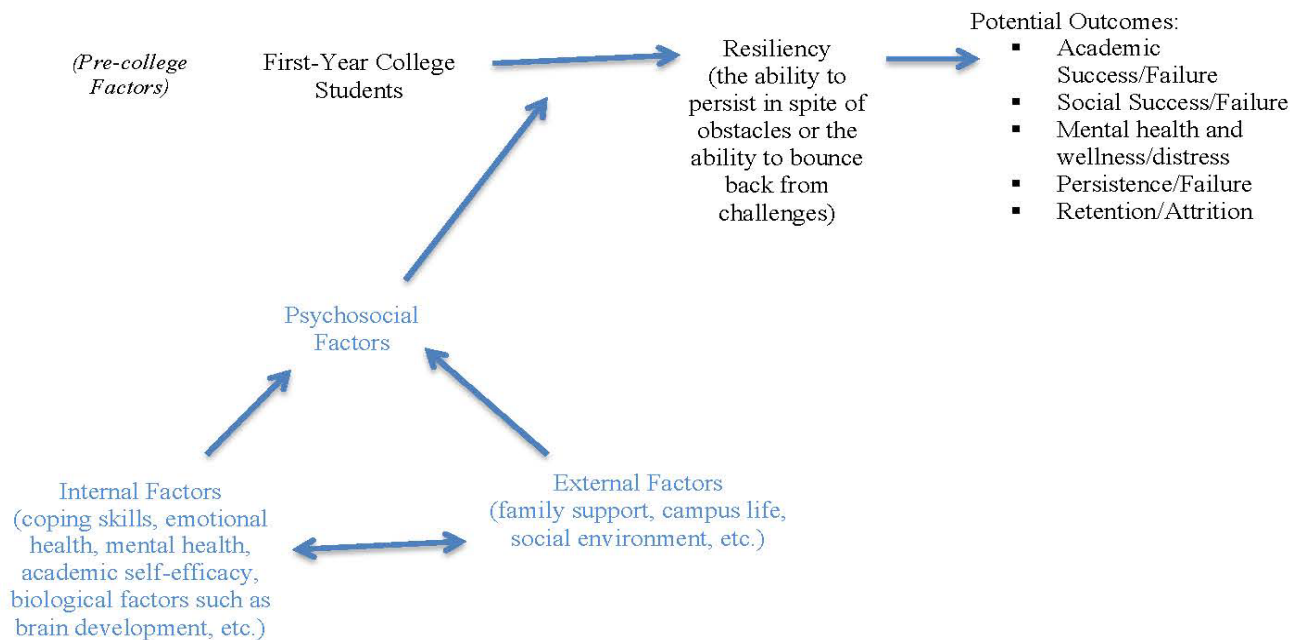
5.5 CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study explores how high-achieving students experience resiliency in their first year of college. Throughout the interviews, students described how they experienced stressful and challenging situations, how they coped with those situations, and what they learned from going through that experience. Participants revealed dealing with many challenging academic and social experiences during their first year to which they applied both independent and dependent coping strategies. Students revealed that learning from those challenges was an important part of their experience and helped them to be more prepared for future challenges. Recommendations for educators who work with high-achieving students include first, dispelling the myth that high-achieving students do not experience stress or challenges in their first year, secondly, promoting an individualized approach to advising high-achieving students, and lastly, the creating opportunities for students to share stories of resilience. Educators can use these findings as a guide to help high-achieving students succeed academically and socially in their first year of college.

APPENDIX A

CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENT RESILIENCY

Note that although the concepts indicated in the model do not present an exhaustive list of factors that may impact a first-year college student's ability to be resilient, it does attempt to show an outline of the features of resiliency that are significant in both research and in practice. Pre-college factors are not discussed in detail in this paper; however, they are listed in this model because they indicate individual factors and prior experiences that could influence students' resiliency during their first years (a topic that is perhaps beyond the scope of this particular analysis but still important to mention).



APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction

- Please tell me a little about yourself.
 - What is your major?
 - Where are you from (hometown)?
 - What is your family like?
 - Why did you choose the University of Pittsburgh?
 - Can you briefly describe your high school experience?
 - Describe your co-curricular involvement at the University. (In other words, how do you spend your time outside of classes and studying?)
 - Have you participated in any leadership experiences (such as leading teams, clubs, organizations, or committees) during your time at the University? If so, please explain.

How do high-achieving students describe stressful experiences from their first year in college?

- Think back to your first year in college. Can you describe some stressful or challenging experiences that you had during your first year?
- Select one of those experiences.
 - What was stressful or challenging about that experience? (What was the context: academic, social, or other?)
 - When did this experience occur?
 - Why did this experience occur?
 - How did you feel when this experience happened?

How do high-achieving students describe coping with their stressful experiences from their first year in college?

- How were you prepared or not prepared for this challenge?
 - How does your experience from high school play a role as you encountered challenges in your first year of college?

- How did you cope with or bounce back from that stressful or challenging experience?
 - What actions did you take, if any?
- What was helpful to you in coping with that experience?
 - Were there any individual relationships (family, peers, advisors, faculty, resident assistants, etc.), group relationships (organizations), or institutional resources (at the University) that assisted you?
- How did your personal characteristics play a role in navigating through this experience?
- What barriers did you face in coping with that experience?
- What were your sources of support during this experience (if any)? What relationships were supportive during this time?
- What was the end result of this stressful or challenging experience (if any)?
- How were you expected to deal with this challenge?

How do high-achieving students describe their learning as a result of coping with stressful experiences in their first year in college?

- What did you learn as a result of this experience?
- Looking back, what would have been helpful for you to better deal with this experience? (What support, resources, or interventions would have been helpful before, during or after the experience?)
- What does resiliency mean to you? Or, what does it mean to be a resilient person?
- Would you describe yourself as a resilient person? Why or why not?
- How did this experience change the way that you now approach stressful situations (if at all)?
 - Can you share an example of another stressful or challenging situation that you have faced since then? How did you deal with that next experience?
 - If you haven't faced a similar situation again, what do you think you would do differently now if you found yourself in a similar situation?
- What advice would you give to another student in this same situation?
- Is there anything else that I did not ask you about that you think was significant for you during your first year of college?
- Was there anything that you talked about in this interview that gave you some new insight or awareness about yourself? If so, please explain.

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT PRE-SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What is your current GPA?
2. Are you involved with any co-curricular activities (such as student organization involvement, research, internship, and other institutional activities)? Please briefly list your involvement including any leadership positions that you may hold.
3. Are you currently enrolled as a full time student at the University?
4. What is your academic status (first-year, sophomore, junior, senior, or other)?
5. What is your major?
6. What is your gender?
7. What is your racial identity?
8. What is the name of the high school you attended and where is it located (city, state)?
9. Has anyone else in your family earned a college degree?

APPENDIX D

EXAMPLE CONSENT FORM

Consent to act as a Participant in a Research Study

Title: Resilient Behaviors of High-Achieving Students in their First Year of College

Principle Investigator: Sarah Popovich
University of Pittsburgh
601 William Pitt Union
412-624-5203
sarahpopovich@pitt.edu

Why is this research being done?

You are being asked to participate in a research study in which you will be asked questions about your experience during your first year as a student at the University of Pittsburgh. Specifically this research seeks to gain a better understanding of how students use resilient behaviors in their first year of college.

Who is being asked to take part in this research study?

You are being invited to participate in this research study because you were or are eligible for membership in Phi Eta Sigma at the University of Pittsburgh. Approximately 10 individuals will participate in this research study.

What procedures will be performed for research purposes?

Interview Procedures

You will be asked to participate in a 1-hour interview session with the Principle Investigator. During this time, you will be asked a series of questions about your first-year experience. You

will be asked to describe any challenging experiences that you faced during your time as a first year student as well as your experiences up until the date of the interview. You are free to choose which questions to answer and which questions you would prefer not to answer. Similarly, the degree of detail given is up to your discretion. All interviews will be recorded via audio recording device.

Analysis Procedures

Once the interviews are completed, the Principle Investigator will transcribe the interviews. The Principle Investigator will then analyze the transcriptions to look for similarities and themes throughout the interviews. This analysis will seek to characterize and describe the behaviors and perceptions of students during their first year experience at the University of Pittsburgh.

What are the possible risks, side effects and discomforts of this research study?

This research study will ask specific questions about your experiences and feelings. The interview may lead to discussion about issues and topics that may invoke emotion. However, these questions will cause no more stress than what you would encounter in a normal conversation about this topic. If at any time you are experiencing emotional distress, we can discontinue the interview.

The conversations that take place during this study will have no impact or influence on your standing at the university.

What is the expected duration of the participation?

You are being asked to participate in a 1-hour interview. At your discretion, this interview may last more than one hour.

What are the benefits to participating in this study?

As a participant in this research study, you will contribute to the field of knowledge about the first year student experience. This research study hopes to inform the academic community so that they can better understand the experience of high-achieving students. You will likely receive no direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Will I be paid if I take part in this research study?

You will receive a \$5 Panera Bread gift card for taking part in this research study. To receive this payment, you must participate in the 1-hour interview. You are not required to answer all interview questions in order to receive the payment. If the interview is discontinued due to emotional distress, you will still receive payment for participation.

Who will know about my participation in this reach study?

Any information about you obtained from this research study will be kept confidential (private). All records relating to your involvement in this reach study will be stored in a locked file cabinet. Your identity on these records will be indicated by a pseudo name. And your identity will be kept separate from the research records. You will not be identified by name in any publication of the research results unless you sign a separate consent form giving your permission (release).

Who will have access to identifiable information related to my participation in this research study?

In addition to the investigator on the first page of this authorization (consent) form and their research staff, the following individuals will or may have access to identifiable information (which may include your identifiable information) related to your participation in this research study:

Authorized representatives of the University of Pittsburgh Research Conduct and Compliance Office may review your identifiable research information (which may include your identifiable information) for the purposes of monitoring the appropriate conduct of this research.

In unusual cases, the investigator may be required to release identifiable information related to your participation in this reach study in response to an order from a court of law. If the investigators learn that you or someone with whom you are involved is in serious danger or potential harm, they will need to inform, as required by Pennsylvania law, the appropriate agencies.

For how long will the investigators be permitted to use and disclose identifiable information related to my participation in this research study?

The investigators may continue to use and disclose, for the purposes described above, identifiable information (which may include your identifiable medical information) related to your participation in this research study for a minimum of seven years after final reporting or publication of a project.

Is my participation in this research study voluntary?

Your participation in this research study, to include the use and disclosure of your identifiable information for the purposes described above, is completely voluntary. (Note, however, that if you do not provide your consent for the use and disclosure of your identifiable information for the purposes described above, you will not be allowed to participate in the research study.) Whether or not you provide your consent for participation in this research study will have no effect on your current or future relationship with the University of Pittsburgh.

May I withdraw, at a future date, my consent for participation in this research study?

You may withdraw, at any time, your consent for participation in this research study, to include the use and disclosure of your identifiable information for the purposes described above. (Note, however, that if you withdraw your consent for the use and disclosure of your identifiable medical record information for the purposes described above, you will also be withdrawn, in general, from further participation in this research study.) Any identifiable research or medical information recorded for, or resulting from, your participation in this research study prior to the date that you formally withdrew your consent may continue to be used and disclosed by the investigators for the purposes described above.

To formally withdraw your consent for participation in this research study you should provide a written and dated notice of this decision to the principal investigator of this research study at the address listed on the first page of this form.

Your decision to withdraw your consent for participation in this research study will have no effect on your current or future relationship with the University of Pittsburgh.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT

The above information has been explained to me and all of my current questions have been answered. I understand that I am encouraged to ask questions about any aspect of this research study during the course of this study, and that such future questions will be answered by a qualified individual or by the investigator(s) listed on the first page of this consent document at the telephone number(s) given. I understand that I may always request that my questions, concerns or complaints be addressed by a listed investigator.

I understand that I may contact the Human Subjects Protection Advocate of the IRB Office, University of Pittsburgh (1-866-212-2668) to discuss problems, concerns, and questions; obtain information; offer input; or discuss situations that have occurred during my participation.

By signing this form, I agree to participate in this research study. A copy of this consent form will be given to me.

Participant's Signature

Printed Name of Participant

Date

CERTIFICATION of INFORMED CONSENT

I certify that I have explained the nature and purpose of this research study to the above-named individual(s), and I have discussed the potential benefits and possible risks of study participation. Any questions the individual(s) have about this study have been answered, and we will always be available to address future questions as they arise.

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent

Role in Research Study

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW INTRODUCTORY SCRIPT

You are being asked to participate in a research study in which you will be asked to describe your experiences as a first year student at the University of Pittsburgh. Specifically, this study seeks to gain a better understanding of how students use resilient behaviors in their first year of college.

There are no foreseeable risks to your participation in this study. Any information you provide during the interview or throughout the course of the research study will not impact your standing at the University. Your interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. Your name will be removed and replaced with a different first name. This is to protect your identity. As the primary investigator, I will be the only person with access to the original audio recording and transcription. These recordings and transcriptions will be placed in a locked file cabinet and destroyed after the final report is complete.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time with no penalty. For participating in the study, you will receive a \$5 Panera gift card.

This study is being conducted by Sarah Popovich who can be contacted at 412-624-5203 or sarahpopovich@pitt.edu.

APPENDIX F

FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS FOR MEMBER CHECKING

Please review the memo and answer the follow questions:

1. Describe your initial thoughts about the interview memo.
2. Is there anything from the memo that you disagree with?
3. Upon further reflection, is there anything significant that you feel should have been included in your interview that was not included?

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