Academic Resilience Perceptions of Graduate Students and Graduate Professors

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ABSTRACT

This study's objective was to understand the current perceptions of academic resilience in graduate level health science students and faculty. This study used a descriptive qualitative research design. Six graduate faculty members and four graduate students participated in two separate focus groups. Participants were included if they were full-time faculty or enrolled as full-time students in graduate programs. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews via Microsoft Teams and analyzed through transcription and thematic analysis amongst the three researchers. Perspectives on academic resilience differed between faculty and students. The degree to which faculty felt resilience depended on autonomy and intrinsic motivation, while students felt it depended upon support systems. The inclusion of resilience within graduate level health science programs is needed to promote successful future healthcare practitioners. More research is warranted to continue to develop the facilitation of academic resilience in graduate level students.

Keywords: *education, resilience, perspectives, academic resilience*

INTRODUCTION

This study aimed to assess the current perceptions of academic resilience in graduate level health science students and faculty. Resilience can be defined as the ability of an individual to handle stress and adversity (Ahmed et al., 2018). However, a universal definition for academic resilience does not exist but is typically based on adaptation and change (Ye et al., 2021). Correspondingly, academic resilience is a student's ability to maintain motivation to remain successful in their studies despite adverse and taxing occurrences. Academic resilience is influenced by both internal and external factors (Permatasari et al., 2021). Internal factors are feelings and characteristics within the student, such as beliefs, values, and self-esteem. External factors include environments, family, teachers, and friends (Beri & Kumar, 2018; Jowkar et al., 2014; Permatasari et al., 2021). In education, academic resilience can be measured in terms of early traits, conditions, and experiences (Ye et al., 2021). Academic resilience research has inherently focused on definitional issues as a measurement. In turn, this study sought to examine students' and faculty's perspectives on resilience.

Those enrolled in higher education may experience challenges related to difficulties in school adaptations, such as new learning processes, that can affect academic success

(Permatasari et al., 2021). Academic resilience, when exhibited by a student, allows for the potential to overcome academic challenges, setbacks, and stress (Yang & Wang, 2021). Researchers have found academic resilience to be a key component in social emotional learning (Beri & Kumar, 2018). Evidence from the literature reveals a connection between resilience and achievement of academic success for students. Faculty can play a pivotal role in fostering academic resilience in their students to allow for a greater chance of managing and overcoming difficulties in pursuit of their educational goals (Quek, 2011).

The relationship between a faculty member and a student is important in terms of academic resilience. Teaching-related factors found to best predict a student's academic resilience included a safe, orderly school environment and teaching focusing on comprehension and reflection. Additional factors increasing students' academic resilience were students' personal and family variables, including familial support and feelings of belonging (García-Crespo et al., 2021). Additional contributions to academic resilience in students include teacher support, peer support, and social support (Permatasari et al., 2021). Aspects of these factors all contribute to academic resilience among students in higher education.

Recent literature by Raghunathan et al. (2022) found elements of resilience that are relevant from teachers' perspectives in the education system. Their findings focus on internal, interpersonal, and external aspects of teachers while increasing support, strong academic leadership, trust, self-motivation, communication, and an emphasis on student-teacher communication. Another recent study by Squires et al. (2022) explains potential student stressors associated with work-life balance and student expression that learning coping strategies could be a useful tool in mitigating workload stress. For this reason, it is understood that the promotion of well-being in classrooms can be beneficial for both students and teachers alike.

METHOD
Sampling and Participants
Institutional review board approval was received by the University prior to participant recruitment. Once approved, convenience sampling was utilized for participant recruitment through university email lists. Potential participants responded with the ability to attend a virtual focus group through the Microsoft Teams platform. The moderator and co-moderators verified that the potential participants met the inclusion criteria, either enrolled as full-time graduate students or current faculty members. After participant verification, the moderator and co-moderators grouped them according to status (i.e., student or faculty) and sent a link with an informed consent form and a link to attend the virtual focus group.

Data Collection
Two sets of focus group questions were composed and verified by two independent content experts to ensure the questions were open-ended, flexible, unambiguous, and unbiased.

Questions were developed for both the faculty focus group and student focus group with the purpose of understanding their perspectives on academic resilience (Appendix A and B). The moderator and co-moderators facilitated the interviews with the two focus groups. Interviews with the focus groups were conducted, recorded, and transcribed through the Microsoft Teams platform.

Data Analysis

At the conclusion of each focus group, the moderator and co-moderators debriefed with each other to record their initial impressions of the discussion, noting any highlights, issues, or immediate conclusions. The interviews were transcribed through Microsoft Teams, and analysis of the transcriptions was performed by the three researchers to analyze and identify themes of participants' responses. After independently identifying themes, the three researchers reconvened and discussed themes identified in both the student focus group and the faculty focus group. Ongoing dialogue and communication between the researchers provided several opportunities to address potential bias, contributing to the internal validity of thematic analysis.

RESULTS

Six faculty members and four graduate students participated in the study. Of the faculty participants, three were faculty in the Occupational Therapy Doctorate program, one was faculty in the Master of Physician Assistant Science program, one was faculty in the Doctor of Physical Therapy program, and one was faculty in the Master of Science in Speech-Language Pathology program. In the student focus group, two students were enrolled in the Occupational Therapy Doctorate program, one student was enrolled in the Doctor of Physical Therapy Program, and the other student was enrolled in the Master of Physician Assistant Science program. Of the ten participants who participated in the focus groups, nine were female, and one was male. Through the process of open-ended semi-structured interview questions, common themes were identified in both the faculty and student focus groups. Themes identified in the faculty focus group included the necessity of autonomy and flexibility, academic resilience can be learned through coaching, the COVID-19 pandemic's negative effect on resilience, and overall student responsibility. Themes identified in the student focus group included the importance of support systems, future career-related and academic goals, and the academic rigor and perceived challenges that graduate level programs require compared to undergraduate programs.

Faculty Perspectives on Academic Resilience

Based on faculty perspectives of academic resilience, students demonstrate diminished skills of accountability, ownership, autonomy, and personal responsibility for their learning. In graduate-level health profession programs, faculty recognized the importance of students taking initiative and the increased need for students to handle feedback and

academic workload. Faculty B stated that resilience can be defined as "the ability to thrive despite barriers," and Faculty C agreed and added, "the ability to thrive despite barriers and keep growing." The faculty also noted students' difficulties with self-discipline and the inability to push through setbacks or other challenges related to academics, reflecting limited academic resilience among graduate level health science students. Faculty D stated the importance of [students] "openness to adapting to the environment that they're in so that they can strive in it without resenting it or fighting it or, you know, kind of going with the grain so that they can do the best with the resources and the environment that they have." The need for students to be flexible was a common theme that emerged throughout the focus group and was agreed upon by all six faculty members. It is understood that flexibility should be prioritized in the promotion of both self-resilience and successful academic achievement in graduate students.

Is Academic Resilience Innate or Can It Be Facilitated and Learned?
Another theme found in the faculty focus group was the belief that it is possible to learn academic resilience through coaching. Faculty stated they had experience in coaching graduate level health science students with the result of improved academic resilience. The mental fortitude of resilience was unable to be achieved, but the behaviors that were needed to establish academic resilience could be facilitated with coaching. It was stated and agreed upon by the participants that if the student is open to change and growth, faculty can facilitate academic durability. Faculty A described resilience as a "growth mindset," and Faculty B stated, "It is an active choice... it's a mindset you are choosing to be in." The participants emphasized that future students continue to choose to be in a mindset to alter behavior for further development of academic resilience.

The four students participating believed academic resilience is a concept that can be learned and fostered. On the other hand, faculty members believed academic resilience was an active choice, a choice in which one must actively engage rather than be learned. The faculty mentioned how academic resilience has the potential to develop through coaching and skills training. The faculty mentioned barriers to academic resilience being associated with the inability to accept feedback. The importance of not only accepting feedback but applying the feedback to your academics was noted by the faculty but not by the students. It is important for students to see the whole picture and not have academic resilience cultivated for the purpose of grades but for the better of future clients.

COVID-19 Pandemic Effects on Academic Resilience
It was noted that since the COVID-19 pandemic, faculty has seen a decline in graduate level health science students' academic resilience. Instead of students seeking feedback to improve their academic skillsets, students seek shortcuts. Faculty explained a shift in students' desire to expand their knowledge, and instead, a dependency on professors' knowledge has grown. This is concerning, from a faculty perspective, as students who are

enrolled in graduate level health science programs must exhibit certain soft skills in their future practice as healthcare professionals. The faculty explained that soft skills, such as reading nonverbal behaviors and working with diverse clients, are essential in "people" professions, such as healthcare. Additionally, Faculty C noted increased mental health concerns, such as anxiety being significantly more prevalent in students since the COVID-19 pandemic. Faculty members agreed, and Faculty D added upon this by including social skills. An increase in anxiety and a decline in social skills since the global pandemic could have interfered with students' ability to accept feedback, limiting the ability to succeed in both academic and professional situations.

Graduate Students' Perspectives on Academic Resilience
Based on graduate level health science students' perspective of academic resilience, it was elucidated that constant reassurance and motivation geared towards the "end goal" can positively support academic resilience. Student A stated, "In the grand scheme of things... This isn't for me and myself and like my grade at the end of this, it's for someone who I've never met before who's going to be coming to me next, expecting me to get them better." Student B responded with, "Remind yourself about why you're here and what you ultimately want to do." Additionally, students identified their support systems, such as familial and friendship supports and work-life balance as necessary factors to achieving academic resilience while undergoing increased rigor and stress accompanied in graduate level studies. One graduate student noted that not only is self-motivation required to succeed in graduate school, but the ability to be disciplined and remain disciplined despite challenges and difficulties in school. Another aspect of support in terms of academic resilience was the choice for students to surround themselves with like-minded individuals who share similar goals. Student C stated having this support "will motivate you to overcome those adversities." Students mentioned barriers to academic resilience as negativity and catastrophizing their academic situation. Another student mentioned that when the academic situation becomes overwhelming and feelings of stress increase, it is important to continue to remind oneself of the purpose of academic rigor. Student D stated that sometimes students must "take a step back and analyze what can I do to be better." The participants also indicated that the information being learned in the classroom and clinical rotations is not to benefit oneself but to benefit and change the lives of future clients.

DISCUSSION
The students participating in this research study are all on the path to receiving a graduate-level degree in a specialized area of practice. For this reason, it is especially important for students to be autonomous in assessing their patients and developing treatment plans for their clients. Overall, the faculty continues to encourage academic resilience through coaching and guidance but understands the individualized journey and path each student is undertaking. Faculty members believe students should take advantage of their educational

and academic opportunities while reveling in the support of their faculty members. One aspect of the students' sole responsibilities for increased academic resilience depends upon taking ownership of their education and being resilient in the face of their own academic opportunities to be more successful students and future healthcare providers.

CONCLUSION

It is recommended that future research should continue to develop the perspectives of academic resilience to better understand what is needed to bridge the gap and facilitate the enhancement of becoming a lifelong learner. In 2021, 77.6% of workers in the healthcare industry were women (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Therefore, the research should be more gender inclusive by including an accurate representation of gender in healthcare workers in both the faculty and student focus groups. Also, a greater number or equal number of students and faculty should be in both focus groups. It is also suggested that situational questions be added to further development of the idea of what it means to coach or to learn academic resilience. Finally, an encompassing ideology from the students' perspectives of if and how faculty have played a part in their development of academic resilience could indicate whether coaching is beneficial.

Disclosure Statement: The authors report there are no competing interests to declare, nor was any funding received.

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APPENDIX A
Faculty Focus Group Questions
1. How would you define [academic] resilience?
2. Think of someone you know who is resilient. How do they show they are resilient?
3. What characteristics or qualities do you believe make your students resilient?
4. How do you feel that any of these characteristics are missing in your students?
5. How can resilience be a quality that someone can learn or develop?
6. Tell me about any changes in resilience you have seen since the COVID-19 pandemic.
7. Does resilience vary based on the situation?
8. In what ways can you promote resilience amongst your students as an educator?

APPENDIX B

Student Focus Group Questions

1. Is there a difference in the stress you have experienced between undergraduate and graduate school? If so, how is that stress?
2. How would you describe your ability to succeed in graduate school?
3. How would you describe your ability to navigate adverse circumstances while in graduate school?
4. How would you define academic resilience?
5. What behaviors do you believe influence academic resilience?
6. What barriers, if any, affect academic resilience?
7. Do you believe academic resilience can be learned, or is it a natural ability? If it can be learned, how?
8. How has your resiliency changed since the COVID-19 pandemic?
9. Give an example of how you have shown academic resilience.