BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE: CAN STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS BENEFIT FROM RESILIENCE TRAINING?

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Individuals react differently to stressors in the work environment and in their personal lives. Some rebound and even demonstrate personal growth after such setbacks; others seem to become mired in the aftermath of difficulties. Those who do not recover quickly often cost the workplace in lost effectiveness. A growing body of literature exists identifying “resilience” characteristics and indicating that one can learn to be better at surviving and thriving after setbacks. The student affairs profession has made a commitment to professional and personal development, establishing a value in such activity. There is little in the student affairs literature to suggest that resilience skills are being taught in professional development. Yet the outcome could be an invigorated and productive staff.

Janet Jacoby was in her third year as dean of students at Modicum College when the president who hired her retired. Janet looked forward to the opportunity to work with the new president; however, in his first private conversation with Janet, the President told her he had no faith in her ability to supervise the division. He asked for her immediate resignation. Richard Farquhar, vice president for student affairs at Middle American University, had a good relationship with the President to whom he had reported for seven years. One day the President suggested to Richard that he no longer was effective and ought to look for another position.

Both Janet and Richard were well-respected student affairs professionals, and faculty, staff, and students at their institutions were sad to see them leave. Janet reacted by getting angry, but soon began to focus her time to evaluate the opportunities she had available to her. She eventually decided to combine her first love, teaching, with her love of student affairs. Janet accepted a position teaching in a college student affairs preparatory program in a nearby state. She later referred to losing her job as the best thing that ever happened to her. Richard became depressed and lethargic, and his colleagues became increasingly concerned about his negativity. They were not surprised that Richard was not receiving job offers after interviews. Nor were they surprised when, after a period of unemployment, Richard began working in the portrait studio at Sears.

Student affairs professionals deal with stress regularly—for example, from high and often unreasonable expectations from constituents, financial constraints, and changing goals and personalities. Crises and setbacks happen in the workplace and in personal lives. While many recover quickly, others may be slower or unable to return to 100 percent effectiveness, negatively affecting the workplace as well as their personal well-being. Work loss might be exhibited through drug/alcohol dependencies, depression, anger and negativity, excessive absence due to illness, or departure from the institution and/or profession. Resilience is “the ability to recover quickly from illness, change, or misfortune” (Morris, 1973, p. 1106). Why is one person able to rebound while another is defeated by hardship? Are there personal characteristics associated with surviving and thriving in difficult times? If so, can a person learn attitudes and skills that enhance resilience in adverse situations?

Personal growth and lifelong learning are values of the student affairs profession for student development (NASPA, 1997) and for professional development (Schwartz & Bryan, 1998; Volp, 1981). Staff development is a “planned experience designed to change behavior and result in professional and/or personal growth and improved organizational effectiveness” (Merkie & Artman, 1983, p. 55). Emphasis on the reflective practitioner has encouraged professional and personal introspection about successful behaviors (Brown, Podolske, Kohles & Sonnenberg, 1992; Nottingham, 1998) and the use of inventories to improve self-understanding (Bryan & Schwartz, 1998; Nottingham, 1998).

Concern has been expressed about attrition from the student affairs profession, possibly because of limited opportunities for advancement, role stress, and professional burnout (Evans, 1988; Lorden, 1998; Ward, 1995). Would enhancement of resilience skills reduce stress and burnout and add to one’s portfolio for promotion? Ward (1995) asked similar questions:

Are there personality characteristics of student affairs professionals that allow them to maintain a rosy outlook about their careers, despite negative conditions? Are they better able to cope than their counterparts in other occupations and thus able to temporarily fend off the consequences of role stress? Do student affairs professionals reach a breaking point where these characteristics (perhaps, for example, their tolerance for uncertainty) are no longer enough to repel the forces associated with role stress? (pp. 42-43)

Job rotation has been recommended as a form of professional development to evaluate and improve skills, enlarge perspectives, and provide exposure of younger staff to seasoned professionals (Robinson & Delbridge-Parker, 1991). Personal “influencers” (Cooper & Miller, 1998), mentors and role models (Bryan & Schwartz, 1998; Komives, 1992) are
frequently discussed as facilitators of development. Clement and Rickard (1992) in their study of exemplary student affairs leaders found personal attributes, such as integrity, commitment, and tenacity, associated with success. They found successful leaders “act with the courage of their convictions to turn crises into opportunities” (p. 146). The authors also found that the student affairs leaders studied had a sense of perspective, versatility, a sense of adventure, confidence in their own ability, an expectation that things will work out, flexible problem solving skills, and a willingness to take risks while keeping failure in perspective.

Resilience Studies

Maslow (as cited in Siebert, 1996) said “stress will either break people altogether if they are in the beginning too weak to stand distress, or else, if they are already strong enough to take the stress in the first place, that same stress, if they come through it, will strengthen them, temper them, and make them stronger” (pp. 90-91). Those who do not thrive may blame others for the disruption and become angry. Others become overwhelmed and go numb. Some people take on a victim’s mantle and never recover (Siebert, 1996).

Siebert (1996) studied survivors of life-threatening and life-changing circumstances (e.g., POWs and Holocaust victims) and identified a variety of qualities associated with high resilience. “It isn’t what a person is like, it is how a person interacts with situations that determines survival” (Siebert, 1996, p. 14). Siebert is a strong believer that individuals can learn and practice the qualities to survive disruptive change and to thrive afterwards.

People who thrive after setbacks get upset but expect things to turn out well. They use humor, empathy and creative thinking to find a satisfactory outcome. Those who thrive are self-confident experimenters who remain flexible and open about resolutions. People who thrive follow a similar pattern after being knocked off balance by disruptive change: they “regain emotional balance; cope during the transition; adapt to the new reality; recover to a stable condition; and thrive by learning to be better and stronger than before” (Siebert, 1996, p. 91).

Siebert identified the following factors as highly correlated with resilience: a playful, childlike sense of curiosity about how things work and the ability to find laughter in our learning; the ability to assimilate information quickly, learn from new and unexpected experiences, and solve problems creatively; mental and emotional flexibility; and empathetic understanding of others, even antagonists. Additional factors included acceptance of intuition and hunches as valid; strong self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-concept; optimism about the outcome of efforts and one’s ability to influence them; a learning and coping response instead of a blaming or victim approach; and the capacity for turning misfortune into good luck (Siebert, 1996).

Orsborn (1997) used ten stages of resilience to describe a recovery process that, like Siebert’s, moves from the initial impact of difficulty, where avoiding suffering is the first inclination, through transcending pain to being profoundly changed. The themes in Orsborn’s The Art of Resilience come from studies of people’s response to painful experiences, and the recommendations mix Eastern mysticism with Western practicality. Developing an ability to embrace change rather than to fear it is Orsborn’s underlying message.

Branner (as cited in Hansen, 1997) described levels of response to ordinary and extraordinary life transitions. In the lowest and easiest level, adaptation, one adjusts and/or copes. Adjusting is a minimal response. Coping is a more active adaptation and involves such skills as “developing a positive view of change, building support, changing negative thoughts, solving problems, and appraising potential danger” (Hansen, p. 217). The renewal level involves identifying values, taking risks, setting new goals, and making plans. Transformation, the third level, is a shift in viewing the problem as a tragedy to seeing it as an opportunity. The transcendence level is experiencing not only the meaning of the upsetting event but the ultimate meaning of life.

“Failure makes everyone at least momentarily helpless,” according to Seligman (1998, p. 45). However, his research suggested that one’s explanatory style—how one thinks about events—can determine if the individual gives up easily or recovers quickly from setbacks. A resilient or optimistic explanatory style is characterized by believing setbacks are temporary rather than permanent, specific rather than pervasive, and externally set. Seligman said that a “pessimistic explanatory style is at the core of depressed thinking” (p. 58). Depressed thinking inhibits resilience.

The use of rational therapy techniques can help individuals “learn optimism” by focusing on the specific problem in the present and not perceiving it as a permanent and pervasive statement about one’s abilities (Seligman, 1998). Seligman measured pessimism in the entering freshman class at the University of Pennsylvania and intervened with optimism training workshops for the most pessimistic of the class, resulting in significant decreases in depression and anxiety for those who attended workshops versus those who did not. Other resilience traits and responses can be practiced and enhanced. For example, one can practice finding humor in difficult situations (Siebert, 1999). Many authors recommend that people develop learning and coping habits in response to upssets rather than victim or blaming reactions (Orsborn, 1997; Seligman, 1998; Siebert, 1996, 1999). Viscott (1996) emphasized that to be emotionally resilient one must learn to accept one’s self and others; deal with emotional baggage immediately, honestly, and directly; let go of the past and of false expectations, and take responsibility for one’s life.
Implications for Student Affairs Practice

Certain traits have been identified with resilience; individuals strong in these characteristics rebound quickly and thrive after setbacks and adversity. In light of this evidence and the fact that people can enhance personal resiliency, what are the implications for student affairs practice?

Resilience training can be incorporated at many points along the continuum of professional practice. Student affairs preparation programs could intentionally incorporate resilience training into seminars, practica and internship experiences. Entry level professionals should look for influencers and mentors who demonstrate resilience in their work and seek to interact with them in ways they can learn such skills. Supervisors should help employees to experiment and to see the learning in mistakes and setbacks rather than where to place blame or make excuses. They also can provide opportunity for staff to develop problem-solving skills that will increase self-confidence. Senior student affairs officers can intentionally model exemplary traits and encourage questions and curiosity among staff.

Division-wide professional development programs might formally spotlight resilient skill development or informally provide financial support to allow staff to seek these skills in external seminars and conferences. Using Seligman’s pessimism scale (1998) as a personal development instrument and applying cognitive restructuring techniques, staff can be taught “learned optimism” to increase resilience and decrease depressed thinking.

National organizations should include resilience programs in pre-conference and convention agendas. Editorial boards of student affairs literature may invite articles that address research into the development of practice that enhances personal and professional resilience.

ACPA President Greg Roberts, in his 1999 inaugural address, urged student affairs professionals to practice resilience strategies in the coming millennium. Although the authors were not looking for resilience traits, Clement and Rickard (1992) identified many such skills in the exemplary student affairs leaders they studied. The consonance between the longevity and success of these student affairs professionals and the resilience traits associated with them is apparent. Change, stress, and adversity will not be eliminated from our work and our lives: It behooves the student affairs profession to intentionally teach successful resilience strategies to its practitioners.

References


THE EFFECTS OF MEMBERSHIP IN FRESHMAN INTEREST GROUPS
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This study focuses on the impact of membership in Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs) at a large, Research I, public university in the Midwest. FIGs are learning communities that strive to integrate formal and informal learning in a residential environment. The researchers found that membership in FIGs has positively impacted college students and their perceptions of personal academic achievement and social adjustment in their first semester of college.

Introduction
In recent years, there has been a significant amount of attention paid to the impact that learning environments have on college students. Students and their learning styles are changing and faculty, student affairs professionals, and university administrators need to respond to those changes in order to be effective and meet the needs of these students (Schroeder, 1993). A particular area of interest has involved student learning and achievement in connection with residential living. Research has found that residential students spend approximately 70% of their time within their residence hall (Schroeder & Jackson, 1987). Therefore, the residence hall is a crucial area in the lives of many students, particularly freshman, who are the highest percentage of students living in residence halls in most colleges and universities. The basic premise that has emerged from this research is that residential environments can be designed to enhance and foster student development for freshmen, particularly in terms of academic achievement and adjustment to college life. This can primarily be achieved by creating or restructuring optimal environments for academic success and achievement.

This study focuses on the impact that membership in a Freshman Interest Group (FIG) has on college students and their perceptions of personal academic achievement and social adjustment in their first semester of college. This study takes place at a large, Research I, public university in the Midwest and involves a combination of research on residence halls, the first year experience, and learning communities. A FIG is comprised of a group of approximately 20 first year students who take three general education requirement classes. These classes center around a central theme. The students of each FIG also live on a residence hall floor together and attend a seminar class once a week which is facilitated by a Peer Instructor (PI). The purpose of a FIG is to integrate formal and informal learning, and thus, enhance overall student outcomes.

Residence hall living and learning communities, such as FIGs, have been found to have positive effects on freshman students in terms