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# "We're Not Thriving, But We're Trying." Exploring Undergraduate Students' Resilience During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Kelly Smith
*Kutztown University of Pennsylvania*, ksmit904@live.kutztown.edu

**"WE'RE NOT THRIVING, BUT WE'RE TRYING." EXPLORING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' RESILIENCE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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By Kelly Smith, LCSW

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This Dissertation for the Doctor of Social Work Degree


By Kelly Smith, MSW, LCSW


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Dissertation Committee


_____

Dr. Mary Rita Weller, Chair

_____

Dr. Stephen Stoeffler

_____

Dr. Yoon Mi Kim


_____

DATE

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

"We're Not Thriving, But We're Trying."  Exploring Undergraduate Students' Resilience

During the Covid 19 Pandemic

By

Kelly Smith

Kutztown University|Millersville University, (2023)

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Directed by Dr. Mary Rita Weller

Undergraduate college students found their lives upended when Covid-19 pandemic mitigation

efforts mandated them to leave their school settings and continue their education on virtual

platforms. Research

on the pandemic and related mitigation efforts has found undergraduate students to be negatively

impacted. Today's undergraduate students are primarily made up of Generation Z who are

identified as having a higher reported incidence of mental health issues and have been described

as less resilient when compared to other generations. Resilience is integral to undergraduate

students' mental health and educational persistence. This study sought to explore the impact of

the Covid-19 pandemic on Generation Z undergraduate students, factors of resilience that have

supported them during the pandemic, and the elements on the college campus that promote or

impede resilience development. Utilizing a qualitative study design and grounded theory

methodology, the study found resilience development may have been compromised during the

pandemic when the typical educational and social structures that promote resilience development

were disrupted. The study took place on a private college campus in upstate New York. Twenty-

seven Generation Z undergraduate students participated in focus groups to share their experience

during the pandemic and its subsequent impact. The study participants identified the pandemic

having a negative impact upon their mental health and academic competence with instructors and

campus support services being integral to resilience development. Understanding how resilience

can be promoted in the shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic will be necessary to support students

as they move through their collegiate experience. This study is relevant to the fields of education

and social work as it has implications for both educational leadership and social work policy and

practice.

*Keywords:* resilience; Generation Z; Covid-19; undergraduate students; mental health; academic

competence

**DEDICATION**

To my Mom, loved and missed every day.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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**Chapter 1:  Introduction**

Resilience is described as: "the ability to bounce back, or recover from stress" (Smith et al., 2008, p. 194). Individual resilience was put to the test when in late 2019 the world started experiencing the first cases of the Covid-19 virus. By March 2020, the virus would be designated a global pandemic necessitating various mitigation efforts to quell the spread of the virus. The challenges resulting from the pandemic, and pandemic mitigation efforts, led to an increase in emotional and mental health issues worldwide (Ewing, et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2021; Patterson, et al., 2021). Educational institutions at all levels were required to cease in-person educational instruction and move to virtual, or distance learning options. For students who were living on college campuses at the time of the implementation of mitigation efforts, it also meant a return home. For students, worries moved beyond academics and social disruptions to include concerns over individual and family health and finances (Kecojevic et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2021; Meine et al., 2021). Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, anxiety and depression amongst college students has increased as have maladaptive coping behaviors (Bisconer & McGill, 2022; Daly & Robinson, 2021; Kecojevic et al., 2020). College students are particularly vulnerable to emotional and mental health issues due to the number of changes they encounter as they transition from their home to their college campus, face new academic, financial, and social pressures all at a prime age of onset of many mental health disorders (Lipson et al., 2022; Pedrelli et al., 2015). Students' mental, emotional, and behavioral health impacts their academic performance and subsequently their ability to persist in their collegiate experience (Eisenberg et

al., 2009). As most of the pandemic mitigation efforts have been lifted, and colleges have welcomed both new and returning students onto campus, gaining an understanding of challenges students may have experienced during the pandemic; and the role their resilience played in meeting these challenges, will be beneficial for campuses so they may provide appropriate academic and emotional support to students. Promotion of student resilience can support student well-being which may ultimately may promote retention and educational persistence.

**Generation Z Students**

Entrance to college represents a move from adolescence to early adulthood. It is important for students to develop the skills necessary to manage challenges that may arise during this transitional time (Dvořáková et al., 2017). Some stressors and challenges faced by students include being away from home for the first time; moving away from social supports of family and friends; learning how to effectively manage their time; acclimating to an unfamiliar environment; concerns over their future careers; finances; meeting new academic demands and identity development (Ainscough et al., 2018; Azmitia, et al., 2013;  Dvořáková et al., 2017; Kotzé and Kleynhans, 2013; Lee et al., 2021; Volstad et al., 2020). These stressors may result in individuals developing maladaptive coping behaviors to manage their emotions and mental distress (Pedrelli et al., 2015). Maladaptive coping behaviors may include avoidant behaviors, substance abuse, self-harm and sexually impulsive behavior. Maladaptive coping does not support or promote mental well-being or decrease distress and may contribute to worsening mental health (Dvořáková et al., 2017; Patterson et al., 2021).

Today's college students are made up predominantly by the generation known as "Generation Z." Generational distinctions provide a framework for the culture and experience of

cohorts of individuals living during various time periods (Twenge & Joiner, 2020). Specific

distinctions between the generations are difficult to identify as there is some level of overlap

between generations (Mahesh et al., 2021). The year of birth range of Generation Z varies in the

literature. Elmore and McPeak (2019) cite the year range of 2001-2018 as their frame for

Generation Z. Schwieger and Ladwig (2018) cite the year range as 1995-2012. Pew Research

(2019) provides the beginning as 1997 with 2012 as the end date. Mahesh et al. (2021) cites this

generation as being born in the late 90's and being raised in the 2000's. For purposes of this

study, adoption of Pew Research's timeframe of 1997-2012 will be utilized.

This generation has been defined by several factors. They are the first true digital natives

(Elmore & McPeak, 2019). They have never known a world without technology such as laptop

computers, tablets, smartphones, and the internet. Traditionally, children were dependent on their

parents or teachers to obtain information, however, with the widespread availability of

technology this generation can access vast amounts of information from sources other than

parents and teachers (Elmore & McPeak, 2019). Generation Z is the first generation born into a

world where the internet was available for public consumption. The internet created the ability

for information to be shared in real time across the world. Building off this ability of

connectivity due to the internet, the development of social media allowed individuals around the

world to create new ways to share their lives. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Facebook,

Instagram, and Snapchat have allowed people worldwide to develop new relationships and foster

current ones. Due to these technological advances, it is not surprising that this generation is

strongly connected to technology with it providing the foundation for many of their social

interactions. During the Covid-19 pandemic, this connection with technology was beneficial in

terms of their ability to continue their education and maintain social connections (Evans et al.,

2021). However, despite technological advances and increasingly widespread access to internet services, it is important to note there continues to exist a digital divide between those who have economic and locational access to internet technology services and those who do not, resulting in a socioeconomic inequality (Schmidt & Power, 2021).

Due to numerous adverse events that have shaped their early childhood, as well as their early, secondary, and higher education experiences it has been suggested that Generation Z is the "new cursed generation" (Gongloff, 2022). Members of Generation Z have grown up in a time of gun violence with school shootings and lockdown drills being a part of their educational experience resulting in fear for their safety (Bonanno, et al., 2021). At the time of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, members of Generation Z were either not born or very young, but the event forever changed day-to-day life in the United States such as the government development of terror threat levels, changes to flight procedures, and the later war in Afghanistan. Members of this generation were too young to fully understand the 2008 economic recession but could understand family financial strain. The technological capabilities afforded to members of Generation Z have provided them knowledge of adverse events in real time as well as exposure to death and destruction from gun violence, wars, terrorism, climate change, and the Covid-19 pandemic. These adverse events were mainly experienced by this generation through indirect exposure. Indirect exposure to traumatic events has the potential to result in the development of symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder such as fear and anxiety even if the individual is not directly exposed to the event (Hansen et al., 2017; Haravuori et al, 2011).

This generation has also seen significant positive events. They have seen the first Black person elected President of the United States with the 2008 election of Barack Obama. His

election also gave the United States the first Black first lady in Michelle Obama. With Hillary

Clinton they witnessed the first female presidential candidate of the United States. Kamala Harris

is the first female, and person of color, elected Vice President of the United States. Generation Z

have witnessed the legalization of gay marriage, and social justice movements such the

transgender rights movement and Black Lives Matter. They are advocates for social change and

actively participate in rallies for climate change, abortion rights, gun control, and civil rights.

**Raising Generation Z**

Parents and caregivers of Generation Z have been given the monikers, "helicopter" and

"snowplow" parents, both of which refer to overprotective parenting styles. Overprotective

parenting styles are characterized by parents displaying levels of control and assistance beyond

developmental need that can prevent effective coping skills (Segrin et al., 2013). Helicopter

parenting refers to a parenting style grounded in fear, anxiety and overprotection of the child and

is considered detrimental to children as they move towards adulthood (Hong & Cui, 2019). The

effects of helicopter parenting are negative with the parenting style contributing to students' low

self-efficacy, diminished self-confidence, and an increase in symptoms associated with anxiety

and depression (Cui, et al., 2018; Van Ingen, et al., 2015). Snowplow parenting is another

overprotective parenting style described as going a step further than helicopter parenting by

attempting to remove all obstacles and challenges from the path of the child (Elmore & McPeak,

2019; Miller & Bromwich, 2019). A side effect of the snowplow parenting style is it may lead to

children developing a reliance on someone else to fix their problems or remove their challenges

which may interfere with children developing resilience to face challenges themselves (Miller &

Bromwich, 2019). A protective factor that may mitigate parental interference of allowing college

students to make their own decisions is whether the college age individual continues to reside at

home or on their college campus (Hong & Cui, 2019). Living away from home allows the student to face stressors and challenges on their own without interference from parents and caregivers. Providing opportunities for students to develop resilience rather than removing risks may be more beneficial to a student's development (Hartley, 2013). Not every Generation Z parent adopts these parenting styles. The ability to engage in overprotective parenting styles may be affected by socioeconomic status with caregivers who have a higher economic status being able to provide more time, resources, and opportunities for their children over caregivers of lower economic status (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Yunus & Dalhan, 2013).

**Generation Z Mental Health**

Characteristics associated with Generation Z include being entitled, weak, unable to cope, intolerant, too sensitive, short attention spans, culturally diverse, liberal minded, educated, and dedicated to social justice issues (Cohen, 2018; Elmore & McPeak, 2019; Gould et al., 2020; Pew Research Center, 2020; Zarra, 2017). Another characteristic associated with this generation is poor mental health with elevated levels of emotional distress when compared with other generational cohorts (American Psychological Association, 2018; Elmore & McPeak, 2019). In a 2018 survey by American Psychological Association (APA), 27% of Generation Z respondents rated their mental health as fair or poor with Millennials at 15%, Generation X at 13%, Baby Boomers at 7% and older adults at 5% (APA, 2018). Additionally, the survey found Generation Z is more likely to report a higher incidence of depression and anxiety disorders over respondents in other generational cohorts (APA, 2018). The findings are similar to results Coe et al. (2022) found in a review of surveys on generational cohorts, where Generation Z reported higher rates of behavioral health issues. Despite reporting a higher rate of behavioral health issues and a rate of suicidal ideation or suicide attempts two to three times that of other

generations, Generation Z have a lower likelihood to seek help, especially among members of

lower socioeconomic groups (Ibrahim et al., 2019). As noted, Generation Z makes up most

undergraduate college students. The increase in mental health issues in undergraduate students is

resulting in strain on college campuses to provide adequate services to meet student needs.

Campus counseling centers are tasked with providing assessments, crisis intervention, counseling

services, and connecting students to additional support services to meet undergraduate student

mental health needs. The added stressors prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic have further

contributed to undergraduate students' increasing need for mental health support services.

**Impact of the Pandemic on Students**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022) for the schoolyear 2019-

2020 there were 3,982 colleges in the United States with 16.6 million students enrolled in the fall

of 2019. Colleges and students would be disrupted in the spring of 2020 with mandated

suspensions of in-person education. The mandated Covid-19 pandemic shutdowns necessitated

schools to move to online, or virtual, learning platforms with students being required to leave

campus and return to their homes. These moves resulted in schools and teachers scrambling to

provide education and support services from a distance. As teachers' resilience was being tested

navigating how to provide adequate education, students were being met with challenges of their

own. An April 2020 Pew Research survey of parents of elementary and secondary school

students who became homebound due to the Covid-19 pandemic mitigation efforts, found that

lack of reliable internet and computer access in the home were significant roadblocks for

students with those in a lower socioeconomic class having the greatest disadvantage (Pew

Research Center, 2020). Students who did not have sufficient technology, or technological

capabilities, were forced to find resources to allow them to continue their education and continue

to engage with support services such as mental health counseling, student success programs, and career development. Resources such as Wi-Fi hotspots in the community, virtual appointments, and bag lunch pick-ups were some accommodations made by schools to meet student needs.

Along with their in-person education being paused, students were unable to participate in social activities, sports, and traditional end of school events such as prom and graduation. These rituals are viewed as developmental milestones that represent a transition to adulthood (Keijsers & Bulow, 2021). The students' loss of almost two full years of their educational and social development must be considered by colleges when developing services to best support students' needs (Selingo, 2021). Social workers providing support and therapeutic services must consider the loss of this pivotal developmental period when assessing and developing treatment programming for students of the pandemic.

This is not the first time the world has experienced a universal health crisis. In the late 1800's a highly transmittable disease, yellow fever, led to self-isolation and quarantine efforts across the United States resulting in several colleges either delaying their fall term or cancelling the fall term altogether (Thomas & Foster, 2020). The influenza pandemic of 1918 caused similar educational disruptions resulting in similar mitigation efforts to minimize the disease's impact. Across colleges, recommendations were not universal and were driven by health boards, and local and state guidance (Thomas & Foster, 2020).

The pandemics of the past and the current Covid-19 pandemic impacted more than physical health. Like the influenza pandemic of 1918, the current Covid-19 pandemic found an increase in individual mental health issues related to the stress of the pandemic (Majeed et al., 2021). A study of factors associated with mental health symptoms among adults, age 18-30, found respondents reporting a decreased ability to manage distress, reduced resilience, and

increased loneliness during the early days of the pandemic lockdown mitigation efforts. (Liu et al., 2021). Research on student mental health related to the Covid 19 pandemic found students had increased mental health issues such as anxiety and depression (Babicka-Wirkus, 2021; Hajduk et al., 2022; Pat-Horenczyk et al., 2021; Yang, et al., 2021). A comparison survey of 2018 to 2020 on college students' depression and anxiety found a substantial increase in symptom frequency with depressed mood being reported nearly every day with an increase from 12% in 2018 to 21% in 2020 and symptoms of feeling nervous, anxious or on edge increasing from 11% in 2018 to 23% in 2020 (Hajduk et al., 2022). Fear for themselves and their family members' health and safety, loss of loved ones, social isolation and financial concerns were, and continue to be, issues students face. Students stepping onto college campuses bring their emotional and mental health distress with them. As there is a direct link between student well-being, academic performance, and educational persistence, providing services that promote student well-being as they enter, or return, to campus is imperative (Grøtan et al., 2019).

**Purpose and Relevance of the Study**

Resilience, or the ability to bounce back and face challenges, is necessary for an individual's ability to navigate adversity and manage daily stressors. College students encounter several stressors and potentially experience adverse events as they enter and navigate through their collegiate experience. A study of undergraduate student resilience during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic in Singapore found students believed resilience to be "essential for navigating through university" (Ang et al., 2021, p.8141). Concerns over student resilience existed prior to the pandemic, and there is no evidence to support that it has improved during the pandemic (Morales-Rodriguez et al., 2021). Gaining insight into the student's perspective of what they identify as promoting resilience can be beneficial to college campuses as they seek to

provide services that will best support students' mental and emotional health. This study is particularly timely as student mental health is straining school support services and schools are struggling with student retention and educational persistence (CCMH, 2021).

It is important to recognize undergraduate students as a priority population in need of interventions designed to support their unique mental health needs. Social workers are integral to providing preventative and therapeutic services for individuals who struggle with mental health and substance use related disorders. Clinical social workers are trained to provide mental health assessments, treatment, and prevention services (NASW, 2023). According to the Center for Collegiate Mental Health's 2020-2021 annual report (2022), of the 1815 respondents who provide mental health services to students, 13.3% were social workers. This study can provide valuable information to the field of social work in a few ways. The study can provide insight into what Generation Z students experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact of those experiences on their mental health and emotional well-being. The study can provide insight into the services Generation Z undergraduate students identify on the college campus as promoting or impeding their development of resilience. Additionally, the study can provide information that may lead to the development of, or further research in, targeted interventions that specifically address the mental health needs of Generation Z undergraduate students.

The aim of this study is to gain insight into the experience of Generation Z undergraduate students during the Covid-19 pandemic; the role of resilience in meeting challenges during the pandemic; and what elements on the college campus students believe promote or impede their resilience. The study will utilize a qualitative research study design with grounded theory methodology. This design and methodology are deemed most appropriate when seeking to understand a phenomenon or process where there is limited information.  With the Covid-19

pandemic being a current, continuing event, Generation Z undergraduate student resilience

during the Covid-19 pandemic needs further exploration to gain an understanding of impact of

the pandemic on this population as well as needs of this population as they move through their

collegiate experience.

Questions this study seeks to answer include:

1. How did the Covid-19 pandemic impact Generation Z undergraduate students?

2. What factors of resilience supported students during the pandemic?

3. What are the elements on college campuses that promote or impede resilience in

   undergraduate students?

The information gathered will provide Generation Z undergraduate students' voice on

what they have experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic and how it has impacted them and

their resilience. Student resilience may be key in helping students improve their mental health

and emotional well-being as well as the ability to persist in their educational journey.

**Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Life is filled with challenges. Growing up in poverty, death of a loved one, experiencing abuse or maltreatment, divorce, break-ups, exposure to large scale tragedies, failing grades, and leaving home for college are some challenges individuals may face (Babicka-Wirkus et al., 2021; Hartley, 2013; Hong & Cui, 2019; Hoven et al., 2009; Rhein & McDonald, 2020). Individual responses to challenges vary with some navigating through challenges with ease, while others struggle. Colleges have a responsibility to assist students in facing and overcoming their challenges (Brooker et al., 2017). Resilience can support positive responses to challenges and safeguard individuals from the use of maladaptive coping skills and development of mental and emotional distress. Understanding students' resilience can be beneficial to educators and campus support services to assess student needs and implement effective interventions to promote resilience development. This literature review examines how resilience is defined and developed, the state of student mental health, current programs being utilized that may support resilience development, an overview of ecological systems theory, and resilience theory both of which informed the study, and will conclude with the grounded theory theoretical framework.

**Resilience Defined**

When an individual is referred to as "resilient," characteristics or specific traits are used to describe them: gritty, persistent, motivated, strong, confident, optimistic, driven, goal-oriented, calm and in control. These characteristics and traits do not provide a definition of resilience, rather descriptors of individuals who display resilience. To understand the concept of resilience, a review of the literature was necessary to understand how resilience is defined, how resilience studies emerged and how they have evolved. There is a lack of agreement in the literature on whether resilience is a trait or a process and upon a clear, agreed upon, definition

(Leipold & Greve, 2009; Rhein & McDonald, 2020; Robbins et al., 2018; Warren & Hale, 2020).

Early research on the concept of resilience utilized a trait or characteristic approach wherein

individuals who had the ability to overcome adversity were described as "invincible" or

possessing "invulnerability" (Masten, 2001, p. 227). Individuals were either born with a genetic

predisposition for resilience or learned resilience characteristics (Richardson, 2002). Early

research did not consider individual development over the lifespan that contributes to the idea

that resilience is a process, nor did they look at the impact the environment has upon one's

ability to develop resilience (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2007; Masten,

2001).

Multiple definitions of resilience exist with no clear consensus (Luthar, 2000). The

Merriam-Webster (n.d.) dictionary defines resilience as "an ability to recover from or adjust

easily to misfortune or change." Luthar et al. (2000), defined resilience as "a dynamic process

encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (p.1) and "positive

adaptation despite adversity" (p.1). Fullerton et al. (2021) identified the concept of resilience as

"a process by which personal resources (protective factors) interact in the context of some

adversity" (p. 22). The American Psychiatric Association (2022) defines it as "the process of

adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats and even significant sources of

stress – such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and

financial stresses" (para. 4). Smith et al. (2008) adopted their definition of resilience as "the

ability to bounce back or recover from stress" (p. 194). To have a working understanding of the

definition adopted by this study, Luthar's (2000) interpretation of resilience as "a dynamic

process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (pg.1) will

provide sufficient framework for this study. With all the varied definitions, two components are

identified within them. The definitions identify the need for adversity and a positive adaptation

to adversity, both of which are subjective ideas that need to be considered when attempting to

evaluate an individual's resilience (Luthar, 2000). Individual's perceptions of adversity and

positive adaptation are as varied as the definitions themselves.

**Development of Resilience**

Resilience has been an evolutionary necessity for species to adapt and survive challenges

and adversities (Leipold & Greve, 2009). As literature can easily cite studies that support the

need and benefit of resilience, how resilience is developed cannot be easily identified. Factors

such as genetics, environment, risk, and protective factors all play a role in resilience

development (Southwick et al., 2016). Research on how resilience is developed cites methods or

interventions that may assist in the promotion of resilience, but they are unable to provide

explanation for what turns on the mechanism within an individual to utilize interventions and

positively adapt to adversities they encounter.

The earliest studies recognizing the phenomenon of resilience in terms of human

adaptability date back to the mid 1900's. At that time, studies focused on children with

schizophrenic parents who were displaying positive adaptability despite their challenging

surroundings (Garmezy et al., 1984). As the interest in resilience development continued to

grow, studies centered around adaptability of children exposed to traumatic events and children

living in poverty. The 1970's saw expanded research on childhood adaptation of adverse events,

the impact of an individuals' environment on the ability to manage adversity, and on resilience

being a process rather than a trait or characteristic that an individual had within themselves

(Fleming & Ledogar, 2008). Early research on resilience in children focused on risk and

protective factors that inhibited or contributed to childhood resilience and the coping process

rather than the development of resilience (Masten, 2007). Studies on child maltreatment and adverse childhood events sought to explain and understand the ability for some children to bounce back from their challenges while others fell victim to maladaptive behaviors and poor mental responses. The importance of understanding the development of resilience lies in the belief that individuals who develop skills that foster resilience will be better equipped to manage life's challenges and stressors (Gray, 2015). Despite the multiple studies that explore resilience and the impact of risk and protective factors, they have been unable to identify a clear formula as to how resilience is developed and why some individuals are more successful at obtaining and utilizing skills that support resilience or why individuals experience resilience in some domains and not in others. Due to the lack of ability in understanding why resilience is not transferable across domains, researchers are cautioned to be specific in their findings when discussing which domains an individual displays resilience (Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993; Luthar, 1993).

Studies on the response of children who have experienced adverse events are plentiful. Children who are consistently exposed to adverse events are more likely to suffer from psychological distress with increased exposures raising the incidence of the possibility of developing a mental health issue (Hoven et al., 2009) Studies of children and adolescents who have a history of physical or sexual abuse, out of home placement, and childhood instability have been found to be more susceptible to negative life outcomes such as substance use disorders, delinquency or poor mental health (Beaujolais et al., 2021). A 2016 study by Shpiegel of 351 teenagers ages 17-19 years of age, explored the relationship between risk and protective factors on resilience for adolescents in foster care placement. The study looked at resilience within six domains of competence: educational attainment, avoidance of teen pregnancy, avoidance of mental illness, avoidance of substance use, avoidance of homelessness, and avoidance of

criminal involvement. Risk factors identified in the study included: childhood maltreatment, out-of-home placements, number of school transitions, and problems in the family of origin. Protective factors identified were positive outlook, religiosity, school activity involvement, reading level, and their helpfulness to others. The findings regarding risk factors were not surprising. Individuals who had risk factors of abuse (physical and/or sexual), multiple placements, and family dysfunction were found to display lower resilience. A finding that was surprising was that none of the protective factors had a significant impact on resilience. Children who transition out of placement are often deemed to display resilience if they achieve success by completing schooling or obtaining employment regardless of if they are achieving success in other domains (Shpiegel, 2016). This study illustrates the inability to predict what factors will contribute to the development of resilience in children and how resilience can vary in different domains.

**Student Mental Health and Well-Being**

Resilience is a key factor in students' overall mental health, educational performance, and well-being (Fullerton et al., 2021). In a survey by American Council on Education (2020), college presidents identified student mental health as their most pressing issue. Research supports that college students have a higher incidence of mental health issues than the general population (American Psychological Association, 2018; Hajduk et al., 2022; Mofatteh, 2020; Pat-Horencyk et al., 2021). The American Psychological Association (2018) report of its annual survey on stress, *Stress in America,* found that Generation Z, who make up today's traditional college students, are more likely to report having a mental health issue and seeking help for their mental health issues. The report further found anxiety and depression were at a higher rate among members of Generation Z than that of other generations surveyed (APA, 2018).

College counseling centers are at a breaking point in terms of the number of students they can serve (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2022). During the 2021-2022 school year 190,097 students from 180 campuses received campus counseling services school year (CCMH, 2023). This was an increase from the 2020-2021 school year which reported 153,233 students receiving campus counseling services (CCMH, 2022).  Of special note, these numbers are a decrease from the high of 207,818 reported by less campuses, 163 in total, for the 2018-2019 school year.  After the past 11 years of the report showing a consistent increase in mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, they flattened during 2020-2021 school year with new concerns of academic distress and food insecurity rising during that time believed to be a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (CCMH, 2022). This trend shifted with the 2021-2022 school year. According to the CCMH (2023), generalized anxiety and depression slightly increased while academic distress and food insecurity declined. A study by Wang et al. (2020), exploring mental health of college students during the pandemic in the United States found undergraduate and graduate students reported moderate to severe levels of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation with over 71% of participants reporting an increase in their stress levels during the pandemic. First year students reported mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation at a higher rate than the other college students (Wang et al., 2020). These findings were similar to a study conducted by Bisconer and McGill (2022) which found undergraduate students to have diminished mental health when compared to their pre-pandemic selves. Of the 1,062 undergraduate students who completed an online survey, 74% of students reported a level of anxiety and 54% with a level of depression (Bisconer & McGill, 2022). Symptomology that accompanies anxiety and depression include lack of motivation, sleep related issues, poor concentration, hopelessness, helplessness, excessive worry, and isolating behaviors (American

Psychiatric Association, 2013). These symptoms may interfere with students' ability to function

and perform in their academic settings and develop connections with their environment and the

creation of new, positive social supports. Learning under stress can have a negative impact on

the ability to remember and focus during the learning process (Schwabe & Wolf, 2010). The

ability to focus and process educational material is compromised when students are entering the

classroom at a heightened level of stress.

Risk and protective factors impact how exposure to adversity impacts individuals. Risk

factors that contribute to emotional and mental health issues of students include loneliness, age,

gender, low self-esteem. substance use, lack of social supports, childhood poverty, eating

disorders, sexual victimization, poor grades, lack of social engagement, mental health stigma,

belonging to a minority group, and lack of family visits (Mofatteh, 2020). For students, mental

health issues can arise from the above risk factors coupled with stressors related to the collegiate

experience such as:  unfamiliar environment, missing home, lack of social and peer relationships,

financial issues, new academic demands, and poor time management (Pedrelli et al., 2015).

These risk factors can contribute to decreased satisfaction with their learning environment. When

an individual experiences sustained life satisfaction, emotional and mental well-being are

positively correlated with an individual's ability to develop resilience (Robbins et al., 2018).

Understanding how to promote resilience in students as they face new challenges can contribute

to their emotional and mental well-being. Students who display resilience when confronted with

these stressors are more likely to develop a positive sense of pride and hope for the future when

confronted with adverse events (Crane et al., 2019). This provides for a student's development of

self-efficacy, resulting in them gaining confidence in their ability to control themselves and their

social environment, which encompasses their educational environment (Bandura, 1984). The

resilient student will be better able to meet the educational demands which in turn supports the belief they can successfully meet challenges in their career field after graduation (Holdsworth et al., 2018).

Students who lack resilience have diminished capacity to respond to challenges in a healthy manner. Behaviors such as substance use, sexual promiscuity, aggression, and avoidance are negative coping responses that may arise from stress (APA, 2018; Babicka-Wirkus et al., 2021; Elmore & McPeak, 2019). The APA (2018) survey found among Generation Z respondents, 50% reported knowing at least one person who had a substance use issue (APA, 2018). The survey also showed that Generation Z recognizes the need to manage stress but only 50% report they believe they are doing enough to manage their stress (APA, 2018). In a study of undergraduate student adjustment to the Covid-19 pandemic, Bisconer and McGill (2022) found among the students surveyed, 10% reported an increase in their illicit drug use and 9% reported an increase in their alcohol use with younger students having a higher rate of reporting an increase in their substance use. Resilience is a mediating factor that contributes to why someone may or may not engage in maladaptive behaviors to manage stress (Leipold and Greve, 2009). An unfortunate finding in a study conducted by Labrague et al. (2021), exploring resilience, coping behaviors and social supports on loneliness during the pandemic found that students rated their personal resilience levels as low. Although unfortunate, the information is valuable in understanding how students perceive their resilience to develop and implement interventions that support resilience development.

While Generation Z recognizes the need to manage stress, obstacles exist that hinder their ability to seek help. Issues such as continued stigma of mental health, lack of resources, and lack of resources that support diversity and inclusion are some roadblocks that may prevent a student

from seeking mental health treatment (Patterson, et al., 2021). Despite the movement over the

past several years to destigmatize mental health and encourage a more open dialogue on mental

health related issues, stigma continues to be a roadblock for individuals seeking help. Stigma is

"The negative social attitude attached to a characteristic of an individual that may be regarded as

a mental, physical, or social deficiency. A stigma implies social disapproval and can lead

unfairly to discrimination against and exclusion of the individual" (APA, n.d., para 1). Stigma

for mental health issues comes in different forms, including self-stigma which comes from an

internalized unfavorable perspective and public stigma which is the societal prejudice of

individuals experiencing mental health issues (Corrigan et al., 2015). These stigmas may work

together or independently to act as a roadblock to college students seeking help for mental

distress. To gain an understanding of mental health and related issues on campuses, The Healthy

Minds Network (2022) developed a survey they provide to post-secondary schools to compile

data on mental health attitudes on campus to understand needs, perceptions, and how services are

utilized by both graduate and undergraduate students. The Winter 2021 Healthy Minds Report

(2022) complied the data of 103,748 students from 103 schools, finding 6% of respondents

agreeing with the statement, "I would think less of someone who has received mental health

treatment" (p. 3). While the personal view is a low percentage, 53% of respondents saw

perceived public stigma as, "Most people would think less of someone who has received mental

health treatment" (Healthy Minds, 2022, p. 3). With undergraduate student mental health being

described as a crisis, interventions to educate campuses on mental health issues may be

beneficial to support individuals seeking help while promoting compassion and support for

individuals experiencing mental health issues.

Students who can navigate stress in a positive manner develop a belief in themselves and their ability to overcome challenges as they arise. Development of positive coping skills such as seeking support, learning how to appropriately express oneself, effective communication of needs, practicing gratitude, developing a mentorship with an adult, and engaging in physically healthy activities are all ways in which students can improve their resilience (Babicka-Wirkus, 2021; Raposa & Hurd, 2021; Rhein & McDonald, 2020; Yang et al., 2021). Participants of a 2018 study of undergraduate college students identified their college experience as a contributor to the development of resilience (Holdsworth et al., 2018). The study identified the specific attributes of resilience as perspective, staying healthy and support that can be developed through activities such as involvement in school activities, clubs, campus events, relationships with peers, connection with professors, and challenging, well-rounded assignments that allowed for collaboration with peers and provided constructive feedback as means to develop resilience (Holdsworth et al., 2018). It is important to note the study conducted by Holdsworth et al. (2018) was completed pre-pandemic, however, studies during the pandemic are finding similar contributors to resilience.

**Challenges to Educational Persistence**

Statistics from the Education Data Initiative (2022) report 15.9 million undergraduate students were enrolled in the fall of 2020 representing a 4.3% decline in enrollment from the previous year. In the United States the dropout rate for undergraduate college students is up to 32.9%, with 24.1% of 2019-2020 dropouts consisting of freshman. Some of the identified reasons for dropout include financial issues, lack of academic readiness, poor social fit, low family support, mental/emotional issues, health issues, and distance from home (Hanson, 2022). According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2020), of the students who

entered higher education in the Fall of 2018, 75.9% of the students persisted at any institution while 67% were retained at the school they began. In *Theory of Persistence*, Tinto (2017) reflected that schools need to understand the student perspective of persistence. An understanding of what schools can do to encourage persistence in their students to not only want to be at school but also to retain the student to complete their education at their school (Tinto, 2017). Gaining an understanding from the students' perspective on their resilience may provide insight into why they leave or change schools and what can be done to prevent their departure.

Undergraduate students are faced with numerous stressors and challenges they have not previously experienced. These may include being away from home for the first time, leaving the comfort and security of family and friends, financial issues, tougher academic demands, and basic self-care matters such as laundry and meal obtainment. These challenges can test an individuals' perception of their resilience and capabilities. Student awareness of what hinders their learning was explored in a 2018 study by Ainscough et al. The qualitative study of second year physiology students identified five separate categories of hinderance identified by the students: nonacademic hinderances, motivational factors, academic commitments, concentration in lectures, and understanding content (Ainscough et al., 2018). The study further provided insight into what coping strategies students identified they could utilize to combat the hinderances. The students, who averaged 19 years of age, identified strategies such as problem solving, planning, setting goals, and giving self-consequences were in line with internal protective factors (Ainscough et al., 2018). Development of programs that support and develop these strategies are necessary for student retention, persistence, and success during school and beyond.

A challenge that college campuses are experiencing related to the pandemic is declining student enrollment and retention resulting in a decrease in revenue in terms of tuition dollars. The American Council on Education (2020) conducted a survey of 295 college presidents on their response to, and impact of, the Covid-19 pandemic. The majority, 55%, of the respondents reported a decrease in enrollment for the fall of 2020 compared to the previous academic year, with 23% reporting about the same amount of enrollment as the previous academic year and 22% reporting an increase in enrollment compared to the previous year. The loss in revenue has resulted in cutting academic programs, instructors, student services, and student programs. When the respondents were asked what they identified as the most pressing issues for their school, 53% reported student mental health. This was identified as the most pressing issue for their schools. The same question posed to the school presidents in May of 2020 yielded a much different response. In the May 2020 responses, the number one pressing issue was enrollment by 79% with student mental health rating as the seventh most pressing issue at 32%. Herein lies a concern for higher education institutions: the need to be fiscally conservative due to enrollment concerns, while providing sufficient resources and support to students. As the Covid-19 pandemic is reaching a manageable level in terms of a physical return to campus by students, the resulting emotional and mental state that arose from challenges and stresses faced throughout the pandemic need to be taken into consideration. For educators, that may mean meeting students where they are academically, socially, and mentally in terms of bolstering support services to improve educational persistence and student retention. For social workers who often are tasked with providing mental health services on campus, this provides an opportunity to educate staff and faculty on the connection between mental health and educational persistence.

**Student Programs**

A means to support students entering college is the utilization of the first-year seminar programs. First-year seminar programs began in 1888 at Boston University to acclimate students to college life and enhance student readiness (University of South Carolina website, n.d.). However, they did not gain widespread popularity until the 1970's. In response to unrest and riots over the Vietnam War, social justice and campus issues, the University of South Carolina developed a specific first year program to "establish trust and cooperation" (Hickinbottom-Braun & Burns, 2015, p.156) among students, faculty, and staff and "to increase positive attitudes and behaviors towards the institution, enhance retention, communicate the value of education, and improve teaching in undergraduate programs" (Hickinbottom-Braun & Burns, 2015, p.156). This early programming has turned into a standard for college campuses to prepare and acclimate incoming students. Students who participate in a first-year seminar course typically take a course in the fall or spring semester of their first year. The courses typically focus on student readiness and involve teaching skills that contribute to student success while wrapped in a fun or interesting topic. The FYS (first year seminar) program courses have shared course objectives focusing on study skills, time management, critical thinking, stress management, self-regulation, writing skills and orientation with campus support services. FYS programs enable students identify hinderances to their learning at the start of their academic career.

A search of FYS programs at colleges in the United States found numerous options for students' participation in the programs. Many of the programs included courses in categories of STEM, personal growth and development, academic enrichment, pop culture, adulting issues and the liberal arts. To improve retention and student persistence, interventions that support, develop, or promote resilience in first year students are of particular importance. Interventions that

provide participants the ability to develop social support, a known factor of resilience, may be key in assisting first year students' transition. Many FYS programs utilize a group setting such as an orientation session, a seminar course, or a residence hall program to present interventions. These settings are conducive to the building of support among their peers in a protective, supportive environment (Knotek et al., 2019). The effectiveness of FYS programs is in dispute. A meta-analysis of FYS programs effectiveness on first year cumulative GPA and retention to the second academic year found that FYS programs have a low level of effectiveness pointing to previous studies have identified that individual student factors including competence, preparedness and motivation may be more influential than a short term, limited scope FYS program to long term student success and educational persistence (Permzadian & Crede, 2016). However, with the compromise of typical academic learning and social connections during the pandemic, it would be prudent to explore if FYS programs are effective in the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Program Interventions**

Undergraduate mental health is being identified as a priority for college administrators. Developing and implementing programs that support mental health and emotional well-being will be necessary as students are balancing typical life transitions in the framework of the pandemic. Resilience supports students' overall well-being, including mental health and academic performance (Fullerton et al., 2021). Interventions that can effectively assist in promoting student resilience will be increasingly more important as typical resilience development may have been compromised by the pandemic and associated mitigation efforts. A review of the literature revealed several studies focused on the effectiveness of interventions to support or develop resilience. One practice that has been identified as useful in developing

resilience is mindfulness. The act of mindfulness involves individuals staying present in the

moment while being connected and aware of their surroundings, thoughts, and feelings without

judgment (Akeman et al., 2019; Davis & Hayes, 2011; Dong et al., 2021; Dvořáková et al.,

2017). Mindfulness based treatment practices have been utilized in therapeutic settings for

several years to reduce anxiety, depression, and cope with stress (Akeman et al., 2019; Davis &

Hayes, 2011). Mindfulness techniques may include meditation and grounding exercises.

Research supports that mindfulness practices in college students have been shown to reduce

stress, improve relationships, support self-efficacy, and decrease maladaptive coping skills

(Akeman et al., 2019; Dong et al., 2021; Dvořáková et al., 2017). As this can be a solitary

activity, programs like this may remove roadblocks for students to receive support by removing

the barriers of wait lists for formal services, stigma associated with asking for help and students

lack awareness of needing help (Amanvermez et al., 2022).

       Cognitive and skills-based resilience programs that utilize set curriculums in a

predetermined number of sessions can be used in multiple settings and have been shown to be

effective in first year students. A study by Conley et al. (2013) completed between 2009-2011

looked at the effectiveness of an eight-month wellness promotion seminar. The seminar was

conducted weekly over two semesters with first-year students. Pre and post tests were conducted

on the intervention and control group with results showing that the intervention contributed to

positive psychosocial adjustment and ability to manage stress. A similar study by Bu and Duan

(2019) on a single session cognitive intervention utilizing cognitive behavioral therapy and

positive psychology with first year students found that the intervention providing one single

session displayed immediate increase in well-being and a decrease in negative emotion with the

results lasting at least three months. Akeman et al., (2019) tested the effectiveness of a four-

session intervention program that focused on goal development, mindfulness, and resilience skills. The study which included a trial with first year college students found the intervention to be effective in reducing depression and stress at the end of the semester. This study was particularly notable due to the limited cost and time to administer the intervention. These studies support cognitive approaches to teach students skills to enhance resilience and have positive results over varying lengths of time. A benefit to colleges is that the interventions can be utilized at any time and are low cost to implement.

**Theoretical Framework**

Student development theories are utilized by college campuses to create interventions that support the healthy development of college students. Two theories deemed relevant to student development as it may contribute to undergraduate students are ecological systems theory and resilience theory. Both theories take a comprehensive approach to individual development and recognize the influence and importance of internal and external factors on development. Additionally, both theories contribute to the understanding of how college campuses can promote and assist in the development of student resilience. While these theories are presented to provide insight and explanation to the process of resilience in undergraduate students, the theoretical framework for the study is grounded theory. Grounded theory is the theoretical framework that will guide and inform the methodology and analysis of the study. Grounded theory is used to explain a phenomenon or process resulting in a theory grounded in the data obtained in the research process.

*Ecological Systems Theory*

A holistic approach to understanding the development of undergraduate student resilience is Bronfenbrenner's (1974) ecological systems theory. This theory is appropriate as it

encompasses the interactions between, and the interdependence of, the environments that have

the greatest influence on students. Multiple studies support the use of ecological systems theory

to explain the importance the different systems play in the development of resilience (Beaujolais

et al., 2021; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993; Hartley, 2013; Laursen & Birmingham, 2003; Luthar,

2006; Masten, 2001;  Shpiegel, 2016;). In Werner's (2005) longitudinal study of individual

resilience from infancy to mid-life, findings supported protective factors in the individual,

family, and community, made the difference between positive and negative adaptation of the

study subjects. However, it is not only the different systems that impact resilience development,

but also the resources amongst the various levels. According to Southwick et al. (2016):

> It is important to note that healthy adaptation to stress depends not only on the individual,
>
> but also on available resources through family, friends, and a variety of organizations,
>
> and on the characteristics of specific cultures and religions, communities, societies, and
>
> governments – all of which, in themselves, may be more or less resilient. (p.8)

The growth of resilience in an individual requires a level of functioning within the

systems that will influence the developing child (Masten, 2018). Beyond the interaction with the

child, the systems levels are interrelated and interact with one another further providing

opportunities to influence the development of the individual (Bronfenbrener, 1974; Robbins et

al., 2018). The environment is broken down into levels: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem,

macrosystem and chronosystem. The microsystem is the immediate environment of the

individual typically consisting of family, friends, roommate, and instructors. The mesosystem

involves the interplay among the microsystems that influence one another such as interactions

between friends and roommate and family and school. The exosystem is the level further away

from the student and indirectly influences the student. This includes financial aid, campus rules,

and campus procedures. Finally, the macrosystem is the furthermost system and is made up of

one's culture and ideologies (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). The macrosystem includes one's

socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and the governmental systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1974).

The microsystem, or an individual's direct environment, is the most influential. Research

on resilience development finds that one supportive family member can be a major contributing

factor in the development of resilience (Laursen & Birmingham, 2003). However, overprotective

parenting of children during their early years may have a negative influence on resilience

development as they get older (Southwick et al., 2016). Interactions and dynamics amongst the

systems are ever-changing, resulting in different opportunities to influence individual

development in a variety of ways over time.

A systematic review of the literature by Christmas and Khanlou (2018) identified specific

factors of resilience at the various ecological levels. The individual level identified multiple

factors in the literature such as self-esteem/self-worth, self-efficacy/reliance,

belonging/connection/bonding, and emotional health/well-being/subjective well-being. At the

family level, connectedness, caring relations, and support were most frequently identified. Most

frequently identified at the school level were peer connectedness, social justice, and academic

achievement. Finally, the community level found social inclusion, social justice, and community

connectedness most frequently identified.

### Resilience Theory

To provide explanation and understanding to why some individuals demonstrate the

ability to bounce back from challenges, resilience theory developed with a specific focus on

children who have experienced adversity. While early research focused on risk and adversity,

more recently research has shifted to a strength's perspective with identification of factors that

assist individuals overcoming adversity (Shean et al., 2015). Resilience theory includes both risk

and protective factors and vulnerability factors (Bolton et al., 2017). According to Bolton et al.,

(2017), "Risk factors are conditions of adversity or environment that evoke the presence and

identification of protective or vulnerability factors" (p. 4). Risk factors may include poverty,

trauma, death of parent, family mental health, and homes with substance abuse by caregiver.

Masten and Reed (2002) identify protective factors as characteristics within the individual,

family and larger surrounding environment that act as a moderator to reduce the negative effect

of an adverse event on the individual. Protective factors can include self-esteem, positive family

support, self-efficacy, social relationships, and a safe and secure home environment. These

protective factors can contribute to resilience development, which acts as a mediator between the

adverse event and the outcome of the exposure to it. Vulnerability refers to personal or

environmental characteristics that may interfere with positive adjustment after risk exposure

(Smith-Osborne, 2007). Like ecological systems theory, resilience theory recognizes the

influence of the interactions with the various environments that are in contact with the individual

as they contribute to resilience development.

### *Grounded Theory*

While resiliency theory and Bronfenbrenner's (1974) ecological systems theory are

theories that informed the study, it is important to acknowledge that they do not guide the study.

Grounded theory is an approach to qualitative research that allows for data analysis to guide the

emergence of concepts, ideas, and theory rather than the theory guiding the analysis. Grounded

theory is best suited for studies of "a process, an action, or an interaction involving many

individuals" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.82).

Grounded theory method serves as both the theoretical framework and the research approach. Grounded theory method provides a means to construct a theory to explain how a population experienced a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As the pandemic is an ongoing event and research is limited, utilization of a grounded theory approach may provide a framework to explain undergraduate students' experiences of the pandemic and the role of individual resiliency during the pandemic. The process of resilience development and promotion among undergraduate college students is not well defined. Literature on Generation Z undergraduate student resilience in the context of the global phenomenon of the Covid-19 pandemic is minimal. Grounded theory is a suitable method to use when information on a phenomenon is limited (Chun et al., 2019). Grounded theory is an approach to research that tries to explain a process (Padgett, 2016). This research method allows for an inductive approach to the data allowing for theory to emerge from the voices of participants rather than the researcher. The utilization of a grounded theory research method is determined to be appropriate to capture the undergraduate student's perception of the process of resilience as it applies to their experience during the past two years of the Covid-19 pandemic and what they identify as the elements that promote resilience on the college campus.

While studying terminally ill patients and their caregivers, sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss developed grounded theory as a research method. Their development of grounded theory method broke from the traditional, and widely accepted, quantitative research that focused on hypothesis and deduction. Glaser and Strauss emphasized an inductive approach wherein data collection and analysis occur in a recursive manner utilizing specific steps. The Glaser and Strauss approach focused on the emergence of theory grounded in the data rather than validating pre-conceived or previous assumptions and hypotheses (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Grounded theory has different interpretations including classical, interpretive, and constructivist (Sebastian, 2019). The different interpretations share in the foundation of theory emerging from data, as well as components such as: coding; constant comparison; use of memos; theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2006; Cullen & Brennan, 2021; Sebastian, 2019). With many of the key elements foundational, other areas such as the role of the researcher, are not (Sebastian, 2019). Classic grounded theory, as originally designed by Glaser and Strauss, takes the position that the researcher is not an active participant in the research but rather is, "distant and detached" (Sebastian, 2019, p. 4). This is in contrast with the interpretive approach developed by Juliet Corbin with Anselm Strauss, which holds the researcher as an engaged interpreter of the data and the constructivist approach developed by Kathy Charmaz, where the researcher recognizes the interactions and relationship between researcher and data (Sebastian, 2019). Other departures from classic grounded theory taken by constructivist grounded theory include use of prior knowledge; use of literature review at any point in the study; established research questions; and the theory being an interpretation dependent upon the researcher that does not require verification (Sebastian, 2019). While all interpretations are acceptable, this study specifically utilizes a constructivist approach due to the flexible nature and the researcher's role in the interpretation process.

**Gaps in Literature**

An overarching gap identified in the literature is a lack of student voice. Studies on student resilience often utilize surveys such as Brief Resilience Scale, Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale, Resilience Scale, and Academic Resilience Scale to measure resilience, resilience factors, risk, and protective factors. While the information gathered is valuable and relevant, it does not provide a deeper understanding that may be beneficial for intervention

development. An open dialogue with the students may provide additional insight and meaning beyond the scale measures. Gaining insight into how undergraduate students perceive their experiences, think, feel, and behave, in their own words, can provide appreciation of the participants' experiences that cannot be obtained through a quantitative measure.

Another identified gap in the literature related to undergraduate students' mental health is a deeper understanding of student experiences over the course of the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic to the lifting of mitigation efforts and return to the traditional in person education. Gaining insight into the challenges experienced throughout the entire course of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on students' academics and mental health and emotional well-being can provide useful information on student needs, how campuses can support students, and promote individual resilience. It is recognized that this gap in literature exists due to the Covid-19 pandemic being a continuing event.

Finally, literature is lacking in studies that follow undergraduate college students after participation in first-year resilience building interventions. Specifically, gaining an understanding of the impact, if any, the first-year student program interventions had on sustaining or building resilience beyond the time of the intervention. As students grow, mature, and face new and varied challenges, a longitudinal study that follows students throughout their collegiate experience would be beneficial to determine what, if any, first-year resilience building interventions were impactful or beneficial to student resilience long term.

### Summary

Resilience, or the "dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (Luthar, 2000, pg.1) is an agreed upon necessity to manage life's challenges; the majority of undergraduate students are made up of members of Generation Z.

Undergraduate students are pushing college counseling centers to their limits to address mental health issues, which have surged since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.

College's ability to provide a supportive environment that promotes development of skills to assist students in overcoming the challenges they face during their collegiate experience can have a formative impact upon their future educational persistence. Historically, colleges have looked to first-year student experience programs to provide education, create a sense of community for students, and support them as they cope with the unique challenges undergraduate students experience.

Two theories have informed this study with another providing the theoretical framework. Ecological systems theory and resilience theory provided a deeper understanding of resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic. Ecological systems theory was particularly relevant due to the lack of connections with their various systems, (i.e., family, friends, schools, instructors) students have experienced since the beginning of the pandemic. Resilience theory provides context of how resilience acts as a mediating factor between adverse events and outcomes. The theories were connected as resilience is identified as arising from protective factors within the individual, family, and community systems. Finally, grounded theory methodology provides the theoretical framework. It is used when one seeks to understand social processes and phenomena where little is known. As the Covid-19 pandemic is a current, ongoing situation, evidence is limited on Generation Z undergraduate student resilience during the pandemic. This study can contribute to the understanding of resilience in Generation Z undergraduate students and provide insight into their experiences and mental health and academic needs as they navigate what has been a novel experience for them.

**Chapter 3:  Methodology**

Undergraduate students are especially vulnerable to mental and emotional distress as they move through their college experience. Resilience, or the ability to bounce back from adverse events, acts as a moderator between adverse events and mental and emotional distress. Today's undergraduate students are primarily made up of the generation known as "Generation Z." Relative to other generational cohorts, Generation Z has more reported mental health issues. Over the past two years, student resilience has been tested by their traditional college challenges and with additional challenges precipitated by the Covid-19 pandemic and pandemic mitigation efforts. Among the studies exploring mental health of college students during the pandemic, a study conducted by Wang, et al. (2020) found reports of moderate to severe levels of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation in both undergraduate and graduate students. This current study aimed to understand the undergraduate student experience during the Covid-19 pandemic and the elements on the college campus that promote or impede student resilience. This information can allow for expansion, development, and implementation of campus support services to address academic and mental health concerns. Additionally, the information provided by the study participants can provide insight into the wants and needs of Generation Z undergraduate students that may contribute to the development of potential therapeutic interventions that may be used with this population.

This chapter shall provide an overview of the design and methodology used for this study. The chapter begins with the research design, followed by an overview of the research setting, sample population, sample size, sampling method, and recruitment procedure followed by procedures for data collection and the steps taken for data analysis. This chapter will end with issue of trustworthiness.

**Research Design**

The study utilizes qualitative design. Qualitative research provides the ability to obtain deeper meaning of the subject as seen through the eyes of the study participant (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). Early research on undergraduate college students' experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic focused on quantifying the experience's impact rather than understanding the lived experience of students. Quantitative research, while meaningful, does not provide for the expression of individual voice. The lack of student voice in these early pandemic studies has been identified as a limitation and as a recommendation that future studies utilize a qualitative design to provide a deeper understanding of the impact of the pandemic on students (Ewing et al., 2022; Plakhotnik et al., 2021).

**Research Setting**

As the focus of this study is Generation Z undergraduate students, the study took place on a college campus. The identified site was a small, private, college in upstate New York. The college has approximately 650 undergraduate students as of the 2022-23 school year. Like other colleges, the school experienced several pandemic-related challenges. Challenges included an abrupt shift to online teaching, implementation of pandemic mitigation efforts to curb the spread of the Covid-19 virus, a decrease in student enrollment and retention, resulting in financial concerns. Across the country, states were implementing mitigation efforts to control the spread of the Covid-19 virus. New York implemented stringent pandemic mitigation efforts due to the state having one of the highest spread rates in the country. The site campus was no exception, with students having to leave campus and engage in online education. Fall of 2021 found a new mandate with students entering campus for the first time, or returning to campus, being required to be fully vaccinated for Covid-19 to attend the college. Additionally, masking and social

distancing continued to be required until spring 2022. The level of measures taken resulted in students losing connection with support systems such as friends, teammates, coaches, and faculty. Students also saw the loss of their ability to fully access campus support services including academic support services such as the writing center and tutoring as well as mental health counseling services.

**Sample and Recruitment**

The study utilized a convenience sample. The researcher is an instructor at the study site which made the students easily accessible to the researcher due to their availability and proximity. Convenience sampling is a form of nonprobability sampling utilized when a researcher seeks to focus on a specific population rather than a random sample from the greater population (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). This was particularly necessary in this study due to the experience of Generation Z undergraduate students compared to other members of the general population would not yield results needed to meet the study's aim. Participants were recruited from the undergraduate student body of the identified college. Participants were required to be at least 18 years old and currently enrolled as full-time students at the college to participate in the study. The study focused on undergraduate students aged 18-22 years of age. This age range is consistent with other studies exploring student interventions in resilience and overall well-being (Bono et al., 2020; Dvořáková et al., 2017; Robertson et al., 2019). Participant demographics can be seen in Table 1.

Four focus groups with a maximum of ten student participants in each group were sought. Focus groups of ten or less are optimal to allow the facilitator to maintain control and allow participants the opportunity to engage in the conversation (Krueger & Casey, 2014). In September of 2022, after receiving approval from the campus used in the study and Kutztown

University Institutional Review Boards, contact was made by the researcher to the office of the

provost requesting an outreach to students through a campus-wide email soliciting student

participation for the study. The email included the topic, benefits of the study, methodology,

their rights as study participants and the researcher's email contact information for purposes of

obtaining additional information, answering questions and confirmation of desire to participate in

the study (Appendix A). To encourage participation, students received a private meal and a $25

gift card. The email allowed for a two-week window of recruitment for study participants. If the

initial solicitation email failed to yield enough participants, the original email was re-sent to

encourage participation. The original email yielded 27 student responses agreeing to participate

in the study. The email was sent a second time seeking additional participants.  A total of 36

students responded and agreed to participate in the study.

Upon agreement to participate in the focus group, interested students were emailed the

consent form (Appendix B) for review. Everyone who consented to participate in the study

participated in a single focus group at a secluded setting on the campus. Participants were placed

with their individual class year. This separation by class year served two purposes. First, it

allowed for students to have an increased level of comfortability with their immediate peer

group. Second, each class year is believed to have a different collective experience during the

pandemic. Specifically, current first-year and sophomore students were not on the campus and

did not experience the need to leave campus and return home when lockdown efforts were

required as were the junior and senior students. Gathering insight from each class year was

believed to provide a deeper understanding of experiences and needs of the various students.

**Data Collection**

Upon arrival at the focus group setting, participants were asked to sign an attendance

sheet, consent forms, and complete a short demographic questionnaire (Appendix C). After

collecting signatures and required forms, the participants were provided with a meal.  The meal

was included due to the focus groups taking place when the students would be eating their lunch

or dinner. After the students completed their meal, the researcher began the focus group by

welcoming participants, reviewing the consent form, providing an overview of the purpose of the

study, and outlining the rules of the focus group. The participants were asked if there were any

questions or concerns and advised they could end their participation in the focus group at any

time. The focus groups were scheduled for 90 minutes in length.

The focus groups were audio recorded to ensure that the data was collected accurately

and to lessen distraction of the facilitator taking written notes. The interviews were recorded on

two devices: Apple iPhone and Apple MacBook using the voice recording application of both

devices. Both devices are password protected with only the researcher having the password. Both

devices remained with the researcher while being transcribed, both having recordings deleted

upon transcription. The recording devices were set to the side so as not to distract the

participants. Participants were verbally advised when the recordings began and ended.

Upon completion of each focus group, the participants were verbally thanked for their

participation, and provided time to ask any questions or elaborate on anything that came up

during the group. Prior to leaving, participants were advised they could reach out to the

researcher via email if questions, concerns, or comments arose after the focus group. The

researcher was aware that the participants openly shared personal and potentially sensitive

information that could trigger uncomfortable feelings. At the end of the focus group, a debriefing

statement (Appendix D) was reviewed with the participants, and a copy given to them, that provided support information available to them. All paperwork completed by the study participants were placed in a physical folder stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office.

This study utilized a semi-structured focus group format. This method was considered the most appropriate method to achieve the richest information from the study participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Padgett, 2016). A semi-structured interview guide (Appendix E) was developed to utilize during the focus groups. The purpose of the question guide was to ensure that specific data points were covered during the focus groups while allowing flexibility within the group discussions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The question guide was piloted with two undergraduate students for flow, clarity, and ensuring the questions were reflective of the data being sought. It was understood and accepted that the question guide may change during the focus groups as the discussion may lead to areas that necessitated a deeper exploration. According to Silverio et al, (2019), "…questions should be broad and experientially focused, asking about people's experiences of something rather than closed or leading questions about specifics" (p. 43). The questions were open-ended and non-judgmental in nature. Blaming words such as "why" and leading questions were avoided. The researcher reviewed the literature on the subject matter, which allowed for appropriate subject knowledge to facilitate the focus groups. Additionally, the facilitator was experienced in conducting focus groups with undergraduate students.

Questions were broken down into three categories: how resilience is defined and how is it built/supported/promoted; impact of pandemic on personal/educational/emotional wellbeing; and campus elements that supports/promote resilience. Note that the questions were used as a guide.

As the discussion unfolded, students shared additional thoughts on how they perceive themselves, how they are perceived by others, pressure on their generation, as well as a more meaningful conversation about mental health as it pertains to their generation. During data analysis, several concepts emerged from the data that provided insight into the thoughts and perceptions of Generation Z undergraduate students. These included: mental health and emotional wellness, academic competence, collective adverse experiences, coping behaviors, impact of social supports, loss of traditions and closure, processing losses, instructor support, support services, service gaps.

**Data Analysis**

All data was transcribed verbatim by the researcher from the audio recordings into a Word document and then uploaded into the NVivo 12 qualitative analysis software program, hereinafter referred to as NVivo 12. The audio recordings were deleted from all devices upon the completion of the audio files being transcribed. Data coding was completed using the NVivo 12. NVivo 12 provides security features of encryption with the data being accessible to only the researcher by password protection. Data was managed and organized in NVivo 12 by creating a specified file that held the transcriptions. Observations, questions, and ideas that surfaced during the interviewing and transcription process were noted as a memo in the NVivo 12 software program. The process of memo-writing is considered supportive of data analysis as it helps to recognize emerging ideas and themes as well as potential bias that may arise during the process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Padgett, 2016).

The data analysis followed the recursive, cyclical nature of grounded theory analysis which requires a multi-step process. There are several theorists who have established specific, distinct steps to analyze the data. For this study, aspects of Strauss and Corbin (1990) were

utilized with the interpretation of Kathy Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory being the main analytic guide. The flexible nature of grounded theory enabled the utilization of aspects of both interpretations.

Grounded theory method utilizes an inductive rather than deductive approach that relies on observation and development of the theory from the ground up through constant comparative analysis rather than a preconceived hypothesis (Tie et al., 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Rubin & Babbie, 2017). Grounded theory methodology is a recursive process involving a cycle of data collection, coding, and analysis until no further findings emerge (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Figure 1 provides a visualization of the grounded theory process utilized in this study.

**Figure 1**

*Grounded Theory Process*
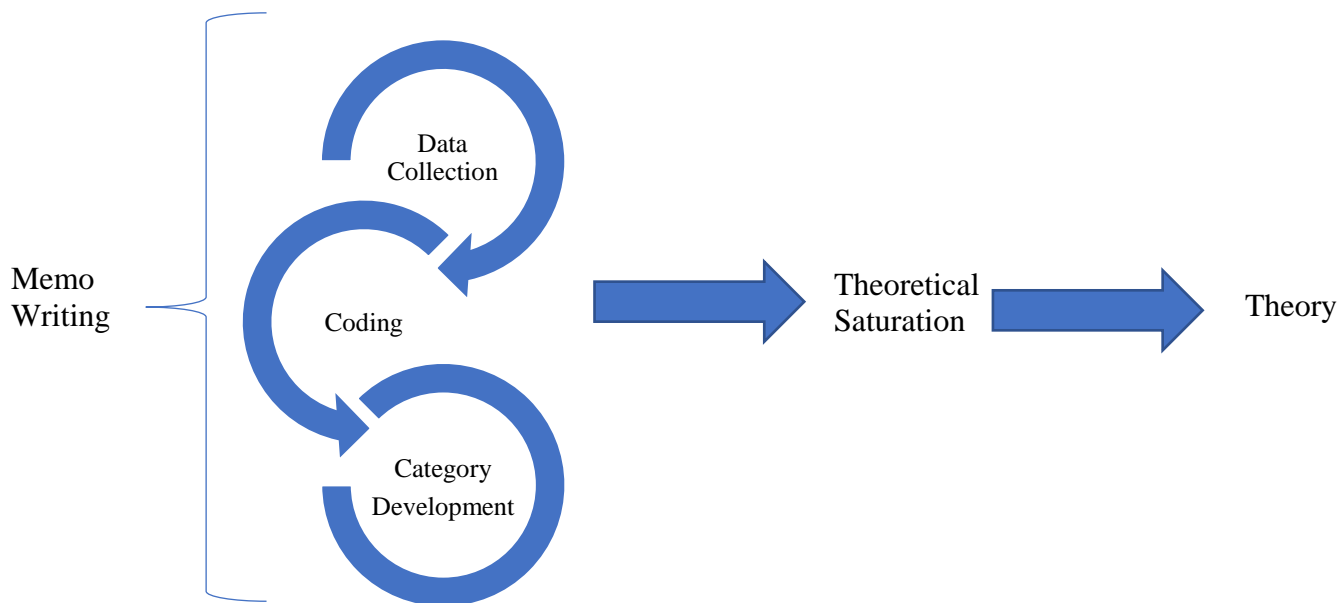
**Coding**

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), data analysis begins with coding and is the "central process by which theories are built from data" (p.57). During the coding phase, data is broken down into segments where the researcher attempts to discern the salient meanings in the data and explore potential connections. For constructivist grounded theory coding begins with initial coding followed by focused coding and the development of categories which build the theory (Charmaz, 2006). Each focus group was transcribed within 24 hours of the group with coding beginning immediately. It was important for the researcher to engage with the data as close to the end of the focus group as possible; this served two purposes for the researcher. First, the researcher was able to focus on the most recent data as it was fresh in mind. This allowed the researcher to make notes on initial impressions and connect visual memory of body language, vocal tone, and any additional visual observations noted by the researcher during the focus group. Second, the coding between focus groups allowed for the researcher to sit with the specific focus group data and engage in constant comparison within the individual focus group data prior to engaging with the subsequent focus groups.

*Initial Coding*

The initial coding process involved the researcher first reading the transcript to ensure accuracy and clarity of the transcribed data prior to initial coding. The first step in the coding process is initial coding where data is broken down into smaller segments with a "code" assigned to the segments that was representative of the salient meaning of the data unit. Researchers may choose to code data in a number of ways including line by line, incident by incident or paragraph by paragraph. Initial coding was done in a hybrid manner with the researcher breaking the segments by both line and paragraph. The researcher first compared the data from the focus

group comparing participants' responses amongst other members of the focus group. After completion of participant comparisons within each focus group, data from each focus group was compared with data from the other focus groups. This constant comparison approach was utilized after each focus group was completed.

As concepts emerged, the researcher assigned labels that encapsulated the meaning of the concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The researcher created labels that were representative of each data segment during the initial coding process and refined them further during the constant comparison process. The labels were derived from participant words and emerging data concepts. Charmaz (2006) indicated that the codes should "stay close to the data" (p. 49) and utilize participants' words as much as possible to maintain the "fluidity of their experience" (p. 49). The initial coding process resulted in an initial codebook consisting of labels, a description of the code, and an example from the data. A clear, concise codebook development is crucial to the research process and serves as a guide for researchers who engage in the use of intercoder reliability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, the codebook was utilized as a tool to detect or determine changes in data interpretation, perspective or new insights that emerged for the researcher when engaging in constant comparison of the data.

### *Focused Coding*

The second phase of coding, focused coding, involved refining the data beyond the initial coding phase. Through constant comparison of data to data and codes to data, focused codes emerged as connections began to take shape. During this phase, initial codes were reconsidered until they were refined into codes that were representative of the most significant findings in the data. The codes that emerge from this process are utilized to develop categories that will build the theory (Charmaz, 2006). This is a step away from classic and interpretive grounded theory as

it allows more flexibility throughout the process and permits the development of more than one category (Sebastian, 2019).

**Memo Writing**

According to Charmaz (2006), memo writing is considered a "pivotal intermediate step" (p. 72) as the researcher moves from data collection into writing. Memos are thoughts, reactions, questions, and connections that arise throughout the data collection and analytic process (Padgett, 2008). In this study, the researcher used memo writing throughout the research process to guide and connect thoughts and questions as they emerged. Memo notes were recorded in the NVivo 12 during the coding process and in a separate physical notebook. The use of a physical notebook allowed the researcher to jot down thoughts as they arose when access to the NVivo 12 was not possible. The memos reflected the researchers internal dialogue between self and the data and moved the researcher forward in the analysis process by assisting in refining codes and themes, critical thinking regarding limitations of the study, and identifying how the researcher's behaviors, preconceived knowledge and position may impact the analysis. Memo writing began after the first focus group with the researcher jotting down physical notes of impression, questions and takeaways from the group and reflecting on researcher questions, pacing and facilitator presence. This level of memo writing continued after each group was conducted, upon data transcription and continued throughout the analytic process

**Theoretical Sampling**

Theoretical sampling is a strategy of gathering appropriate data to utilize for the building and refinement of concepts and categories (Charmaz, 2006). Theoretical sampling involves collecting, coding, and categorizing data while making decisions on what data to gather next to connect categories for theory development (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Out of necessity for

completion of this project in a timely manner, this study deviated slightly from theoretical

sampling as typically understood in the literature. For this study, all the focus groups were

scheduled ahead of time and all study participants were established and assigned to specific

groups. Therefore, returning to the field to gather additional data from new participants, or after

having time to "sit" with the data to determine next steps, was not possible. A variation on the

traditional theoretical sampling strategy was employed by the researcher. The variation involved

the researcher beginning coding and analysis in an urgent manner after each focus group. With

the use of memo writing to guide thoughts and question emerging concepts, the researcher was

able to have an awareness of gaps, connections, and questions and to apply this to subsequent

focus groups. The modified theoretical sampling strategy provided guidance to the researcher as

the researcher gathered additional data and attempted to fill in the gaps, make connections, and

address questions that emerged from the data of the prior group/groups. Ideally, time would have

permitted a return to the field after sitting with the data to identify additional study participants

and continue to gather data. The memo writing process was significant as it allowed the

researcher the ability to reflect on next steps or directions that needed to be taken with the groups

to attempt connections and refinement of the categories.

**Theoretical Saturation**

One the of the dominant concerns with novice grounded theorists was how to know when

to stop collecting data (Tie et al., 2019). For this researcher, this was a specific concern due to

the study needing to be conducted within a limited time. Due to the limited time, the concern

centered on if this researcher could gather sufficient data to answer the research questions

adequately. Grounded theory does not require a set amount of data, nor does it provide criteria

for the amount of data to collect other than data collection is complete once you have reached

theoretical saturation. Saturation for grounded theorists means the researcher has "come to a point at which the categories are saturated, and the inquirer no longer finds new information that adds to an understanding of the category" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 318). Theoretical saturation is not about redundancy in the data, rather it is strictly related to the researcher reaching the point where the data no longer provides substantive information or insight that contributes to understanding the categories or building theory (Saunders et al., 2018). The concerns over the limited time for the researcher to gather data turned out to be unfounded. The study participants provided rich, descriptive data that reached a sufficient level of theoretical saturation. Beyond saturation, the data not only answered the research questions but also allowed the researcher sufficient data to tell their story in a manner relevant to educators and social workers.

**Categories**

The last step taken in the analytic process prior to development of theory is developing categories. The constant comparison process takes place throughout coding and into the development and refinement of conceptual categories by comparing categories and comparing the categories with the literature (Charmaz & Thornburg, 2021). As the literature review for this study was completed early on, it was a concern of the researcher that recent studies may contribute and be relevant that were not available at the time of the initial literature review. The researcher completed a second review of the literature based upon the emergent categories. This second review allowed new comparisons to take place which yielded additional insight into this study's findings.

**Issues of Trustworthiness**

According to Padgett (2016) there are three threats to the trustworthiness of a qualitative study: reactivity, researcher bias, and respondent bias. To minimize the impact of the threats

specific techniques were utilized. One method was for the researcher to use reflective journaling throughout the process by utilizing memo writing that not only reflected on the data, but also on researcher thoughts and feelings during the process as well as any issues of bias that may be present. Another technique involves member checking. Member checking takes place when the participants review the researchers' interpretations for accuracy (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). Both methods are considered positive on reducing the threats of reactivity, researcher bias, and respondent bias (Padgett, 2016). The study's findings section was shared with the focus group participants via email with an invitation for clarification, feedback, or additional comments before continuing with reporting on the study. Six participants spoke to the researcher to share their thoughts on the findings. The six students were representative of different focus groups, with each focus group being represented by at least one participant. The participants agreed with the findings with no disagreement or discrepancies noted.

**Intercoder Agreement**

Intercoder agreement involves the use of more than one individual analyzing and coding the data to enhance reliability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A fellow doctoral student was recruited to participate in the intercoder agreement. The assisting doctoral student was known to the researcher and was familiar with data coding. Upon completion of the initial coding process in the NVivo 12 software, the researcher downloaded all focus group transcripts into a Microsoft Word document to share a portion with the identified doctoral cohort member. The transcripts totaled 76 pages. Of the 76 pages, eight pages were provided to the assisting doctoral student to independently code. This represented slightly over 10% of the data. According to O'Connor and Joffe (2020), there is no set standard of the amount of data to be shared, however, 10-25% is

considered appropriate. To provide a sample that incorporated data from each focus group, two pages were randomly chosen from each focus group.

To measure intercoder reliability, a specific measure needed to be chosen. Typical intercoder reliability measures include percent agreement, Holsti's CR, Bennet et al.'s S, Scott's Pi, Cohen's Kappa, and Krippendorff's alpha (Nili et al., 2020). Due to the limited resources available to the researcher, such as statistical software programs, a percent agreement was utilized. This researcher and the assisting doctoral student met on two occasions via Zoom with the first session being a norming session with the purpose of reviewing the data, how the data was broken into units, the codebook, explanation of codes, and meanings of the codes. After the meeting, the assisting doctoral student was provided the transcripts. The second meeting took place after the assisting doctoral student completed independently coding the provided transcripts by hand. The purpose of the second meeting was to review the results and discuss any discrepancies. The researcher broke the data into units for the purpose of coding. The data units varied in terms of size with a mix of lines, answers, and paragraphs. The total data units on the transcripts provided to the assisting student amounted to 85. Percent agreement can be calculated by dividing the number of agreements by the total number of units. Of the 85 data units, 68 units were agreed upon between the researcher and assisting doctoral student. The percentage of agreement resulted in an agreement of 80%. It is understood by the researcher that percent agreement is not deemed the most stringent measure. One disadvantage of utilizing a percent agreement is that there may exist several agreements that will occur due to chance (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Despite this concern, it was believed by the researcher that a percentage agreement was an appropriate measure due to the size of the study and resources available to the researcher.

**Statement of Reflexivity**

Understanding where potential bias may exist through previous experience is necessary for the qualitative researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is important to begin with why this research is of interest. The researcher is an assistant professor at the study site. The researcher is also a licensed clinical social worker who has worked for several years with individuals struggling with mental health and substance use disorders. Through these lenses, the interest in this topic is two-fold. As an educator of undergraduate students teaching through the pandemic, the researcher has been exposed to students experiencing challenges through the pandemic that have impacted their ability to fully participate in their education. As a social worker, the researcher understands mental health symptomology and its impact on the individual. As an educator and social worker, the researcher has been made increasingly aware of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on this generation of students and how it is impacting them on both personal well-being and educational level.

Due to the potential of students known to the researcher participating in the study, and reading the study, it was especially important for the researcher to be cognizant of the impact the study may have on the research participants. Ensuring participants' voices were interpreted in an accurate, non-biased manner was especially important. It was important for the researcher to consistently take notes throughout the experience to be aware of how the researcher's position may be contributing to potential biases and assumptions.

<div align="center">

**Summary**

</div>

Generation Z undergraduate students have had their academic and personal lives disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. This study seeks to gain an understanding of the undergraduate student experience during the Covid-19 pandemic; factors of resilience that

supported them during the Covid-19 pandemic; and the elements on the college campus promote

or impede promote resilience. Gaining an understanding of Generation Z undergraduate student

resilience development may support student mental health, emotional well-being and academic

preparedness. A qualitative research design utilizing grounded theory methodology was deemed

appropriate for the study to obtain the student voice to gain insight and understanding of the

process of resilience during the phenomenon of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The research setting was a single college campus accessible to the researcher while

providing access to the research sample. The study utilized a convenience sample due to the

focus being on a specific population group, undergraduate students ages 18-22 years old. The

study consisted of four focus groups with a total of 30 undergraduate students.  Each focus group

represented a specified class year. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each group to

ensure specific topics were covered. Each group was audio recorded for accuracy followed by

the recordings being manually transcribed by the researcher. Data was analyzed for emerging

themes by the researcher using an iterative process consistent with the grounded theory

methodology. To address trustworthiness of the data, the researcher utilized member checking

and intercoder agreement with a fellow doctoral student. Identified limitations of the study

include the lack of generalizability due to the research setting and sample.

**Chapter 4: Findings**

This chapter will describe the demographics of study participants followed by specific findings of the study broken down by emerging concepts from the data and finally explanation of the theoretical development.

**Description of Study Participants**

This grounded theory, qualitative study consisted of the researcher conducting four focus groups consisting of Generation Z undergraduate students on a small, private, college campus in New York. The study was open to all undergraduate students aged 18-22 years old at the research site during fall 2022. Of the 36 students who responded to the email invitation agreeing to take part in the study, 30 in total attended the focus groups. Each focus group represented a specific class year. Study participants were grouped by class year with the breakdown as follows: six freshmen; nine sophomores; nine juniors; and six seniors. Students were separated by class year to provide a more comfortable atmosphere and due to the belief, they would have experiences that were similar. All participants were within the age range of 18-22 years old. Of the 30 participants, three participants identified as male with 27 participants identifying as female. All participants were enrolled as full-time students residing on campus at the time of the study.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

| Class year | Median age | Number of participants | Sex identity-Male | Sex identity-Female |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Freshman | 18 | 6 | 1 | 5 |
| Sophomore | 19 | 9 | 0 | 9 |
| Junior | 20 | 9 | 2 | 7 |
| Senior | 21 | 6 | 0 | 6 |

At the beginning of each focus group, the facilitator reviewed the purpose, rules, and expectations of the focus groups with the study participants. After allowing the study participants the opportunity to ask questions, focus groups began with a question on how the participants defined or described resilience; this was done to provide a working, agreed upon understanding of the term by the participants. The participants' understanding did not differ significantly between the different class years or within the groups themselves or demographics. The participants across focus groups identified resilience as "bouncing back," "overcoming obstacles," and "the ability to keep going" after adverse events. The student definitions were consistent with resilience involving forward movement or bouncing back after adversity or challenges. This was consistent with the working definition adopted by this paper of "a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (Luthar, 2000, pg.1).

During data analysis, several themes emerged from the data that provided insight into the thoughts and perceptions of Generation Z undergraduate students as it relates to their experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic, and resilience development on their college campus. These included: mental health and emotional wellness, academic competence, collective adverse experiences, coping behaviors, impact of social supports, loss of traditions and closure, processing losses, instructor support, support services, service gaps.

**Mental Health and Well-Being**

The predominant theme within each focus group, and across the focus groups, was the Covid-19 pandemic having a deleterious effect on their mental health and well-being. The study participants discussed an increase in mental health issues either from a worsening of preexisting mental health issues or new mental health issues due to the events during the Covid-19

pandemic. Study participants described symptoms of excessive worry, nightmares, flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, lack of motivation, sleep issues and isolating behaviors. These symptoms are indicative of mental health disorders such as anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Gaining an understanding of the impact of the mental and emotional state of Generation Z undergraduate students is especially beneficial to the educators attempting to provide instruction in the classroom.

While the theme crossed groups, there were some differences in perceptions of what factors the study participants believed contributed to their mental and emotional distress. For younger study participants, specifically the freshman and sophomores, there was a belief that their emotional and mental health declined during their high school year when they were required to leave school due to the Covid-19 mitigation efforts. An 18-year-old freshman described her mental state during lockdown by saying, "I didn't do a thing (during lockdown). And I dove down into a dark hole, and I didn't crawl out until my senior year." Her statement was met with head nods and verbal agreement among the group members. Lockdown fatigue, or mental and physical exhaustion stemming from Covid-19 mitigation efforts that required individuals to remain in their homes, has been found to have a detrimental impact upon individual mental and emotional health resulting in increased anxiety, irritability, motivation, and ability to find pleasure (Dangi et al., 2020;  Kapasia et al., 2020; Labrague & Ballad, 2021). In a study examining the impact of lockdown fatigue on undergraduate college students Labrague and Ballad (2021), found that students had moderate levels of lockdown fatigue and that student resilience and positive coping behaviors acted as a mediator between lockdown fatigue and its negative impact.

As the participants continued to share on the mental and emotional impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, they pointed to multiple fears. Participants expressed a fear of the unknown factors of Covid-19 such as what will happen if they or a family member become ill, when the pandemic would be over, and if they would return to what they considered their normal, or the pre-pandemic times. The fear of pandemic mitigation efforts being reinstated was consistently discussed amongst all focus groups. In describing the impact of fear as it relates to the hope of future events, a 20-year-old junior class student expressed lacking hope as "I don't get my hopes up for big things anymore. I don't get excited because I don't know if it will happen with Covid still happening."  This sentiment was echoed by numerous participants across all groups.

An increase in social anxiety was expressed across all focus groups. Participants identified insecurity in social settings regarding how to act or communicate with peers. A 19-year-old junior said:

> Social situations in particular, got really bad because I couldn't predict them, and I like things I could predict. So, I would either have really bad anxiety in social situations or I would just isolate myself from social situations.  I didn't want to put myself into that situation about not being able to predict what was going on or what was in people's heads about myself. So, it was just way too much overthinking.

The participants expressed an insight into how the lack of social interactions affected their development of social skills resulting in them feeling insecure and anxious in social settings. A 19-year-old sophomore described the following in relation to social skills:

> Definitely missed out on some social skills. Like our class has missed out on them but I think we are doing pretty good compared to some freshman. Like we just lost some of

those social skills which is like more nerve-wracking because it is kind of a what do I do

situation.

This statement was met with agreement within the sophomore focus group as noted by the

researcher seeing head nodding and agreement commentary amongst the participants. Social

anxiety, driven by worry of not being liked, saw a marked increase from the previous year in the

2022 Center for Collegiate Mental Health Report. While the report does not cite specific reasons

for the increase, it suggests social isolation may be a contributing factor. Social isolation resulted

in decreased personal social interactions which are of particular importance regarding resilience

development. An identified factor that contributes to development of resilience is social support.

Positive social interactions provide self-esteem and self-confidence in social situations. If

socialization is being impacted by social anxiety, it may interfere with resilience development.

**Academic Competence**

Beyond the mental and emotional toll described by the study participants over the last

two years, student confidence in their academic competence was also impacted. The freshman

and sophomore participants who spent a portion of their high school years in the thick of the

Covid-19 pandemic, reported a feeling of being unprepared for college academically. The lack of

instruction and responsiveness of educators was a prevalent theme among freshman and

sophomores.  Common responses among the freshman and sophomore groups centered around a

disconnection between themselves and their teachers regarding educational instruction, direction

and accountability. The following quote from an 18-year-old freshman sums up that frustration:

My 10th grade year, that half, with the worst Covid, when we were not in school or

anything, was the worst because my teachers didn't have like office hours, we never got

on Zoom and I never talked to my teachers. Two of my teachers never gave us

assignments and never emailed us back  when we asked if there was something we are

supposed to be doing.

For the freshman and sophomore participants, the lack of academic workload was particularly

distressing. The participants made connections of how the lack of educational instruction is

impacting them currently during their early college experience. The younger participants

discussed challenges regarding their understanding of material that they believe they should have

a basic understanding of such as math and science courses. They also identified writing

collegiate level papers as an area of struggle. Lack of educational challenges and rigor during

their Covid high school time was further expressed by a 19-year-old sophomore as "I didn't even

have work. Literally when March hit and we were home for two weeks, I didn't do anything."

An 18-year-old freshman reflected, "We were given like one assignment with no instruction.

And it was pass/fail. So, if you did it you were fine and if you didn't you actually were fine too.

Nobody cared."

The pattern of academic concerns crossed the class years, with each year sharing similar

experiences. Participants discussed issues related to academic competence from three

perspectives. First, lack of instruction they received during the pandemic due to the abruptness of

the move to a virtual platform and lack of preparedness by the instructors to teach on a virtual

platform. Second, participants found the course requirements were minimal. The reduced

requirements meant a reduction in the level, and amount, of instruction, course requirements, and

academic challenges presented. Third, all focus groups reported a struggle to be motivated to

engage with their studies due to lack of structure in their school day, increased demands at home

and their emotional and mental states interfering with their ability to focus on academics.

Regarding focus and demands from home, one 18-year-old freshman said:

Like being in school you're in school environment and you are going from class to class it

forced me to pay attention and it wasn't like I never paid attention in school I was a

decent student you know what I am saying but once I was at home and at the computer it

just, I didn't want to do anything. In class it would take me like 10 minutes to do a paper

but by myself it would have taken me an hour. Like when I am not in that environment

because I like couldn't focus and like I have younger siblings and my parents still had to

work so I was babysitting and doing work and then helping them with their work because

they were younger and they don't know what to do.

Junior and senior participants had a shared experience regarding their educational

disruption as these participants were on the college campus and were provided both on site and

virtual education during this time. It was particularly noteworthy that these upperclassmen

expressed a more tolerant and forgiving attitude towards their instructors when compared to the

freshman and sophomore participants who had been in high school during that time. This

comment from a 20-year-old senior provides insight into the grace provided to instructors:

I knew they were trying. I felt bad because we would be online and they would be

struggling and not know how to do virtual. Some students wouldn't get on and it was

tough to get people to listen. And for some classes it was impossible for them to have us

do what we would be doing in class. Like in anatomy, we couldn't dissect anything. Our

professor really did his best.

Beyond the issues of lack of motivation and teacher engagement, equity in terms of

ability to engage in their education due to lack of sufficient internet service may be a

contributing factor to diminished academic competence. A 21-year-old student said:

When I was at home at my house, both my parents, we don't have Wi-Fi. We have no

WIFI, nothing. So, during Covid I had to go off of a hotspot for every single thing I

needed to do. So, there's your phone bill going up, one. And half the time my hotspot

would disconnect from my laptop, and it would disconnect during exams. And I had one

professor where my computer wouldn't work, didn't save half of it timed out and I

couldn't do anything. It wasn't like I didn't try to do the exam, but it saved half my

answers. But I got a 50 on it and there was no understanding of my situation. It was, "oh

do good on the final."

## Collective Adverse Experiences

Across all focus groups, there was an agreement with the need to have experienced

adversity, or negative events, to be resilient. However, of special note they looked beyond

personal, first-hand experiences of an event and identified events that they witnessed by nature

of being exposed through media, school, and family. Events mentioned included: school

shootings, terrorist attacks, 9/11, global disasters, war, racial unrest, and climate change.

Regarding school shootings, reflections of how they had to prepare for events and the impact it

had on them. A 21-year-old senior reflected on the impact of gun violence, specifically school

shootings, on how it affected her view of self:

Yeah, I felt like we also were explained to at a young age, "Oh this is what we're going to

do when a shooter could potentially come into your classroom," and being a little kid you

like can't wrap your head around the psychology of why someone would do that. You just

blame yourself. What did I do wrong? That somebody wants to come in my school and

hurt me.

The perspective of self-blaming can be a contributing factor to self-esteem. There is believed to be a relationship between self-esteem and resilience as self-esteem may be a protective factor for resilience (Liu et al., 2021). Providing opportunities to improve student's self-esteem may assist in their resilience development resulting in decreasing maladaptive thought patterns such as self-blame.

Indirect exposure to traumatic events has also been found to have an impact on mental and emotional well-being. While 9/11 happened when Generation Z was either very young, or not born, it had a significant impact due to the repeated exposure. Ceremonies are held each year to commemorate the anniversary of 9/11, numerous movies and documentaries have been made on the event. It is a significant event in American history and while it is important for the accounts to be told to students, how we educate students on the event may be having a detrimental impact. A 21-year-old senior recalled her experiences being educated on 9/11 and the impact it had on her as follows:

> With 9/11, it was instilled in us all fairly young. I guess because we grew up with the memorials- 9/11 every year, talking about school shootings and stuff. So we just grew up having to worry about someone killing us. We were kids and they were showing us people jumping out of buildings in school. How could it not affect us?

Followed by this account of 9/11 education by another 21-year-old senior:

> They would ask us in classes in grade school to recount our experiences from 9/11 every year. We were infants and they were asking us to recount what happened to us that day. They didn't want us to forget about it, I think. Which yeah, I understand that we need to remember it, but just being afraid of it all the time is not great. I am still terrified to fly. I just won't.

Between the groups, there was a fairly consistent consensus on what the participants identified as adverse experiences. Despite this consensus, there was one area that varied: the lack of reference to 9/11 by participants other than the senior focus group members. Freshman and sophomore participants identified school shootings, gun violence, and climate change as being adverse events that predominantly have impacted their lives.

**Coping Behaviors**

Gaining an understanding of coping behaviors the participants utilized during the course of the Covid-19 pandemic was considered necessary to understand their resilience. Coping behaviors may act as a mediator between adverse events and positive adaptation. Study participants have been exposed to numerous adverse events, including the current Covid-19 pandemic. In response to the facilitator inquiring on what actions they currently take, or have taken, to manage their stress, the conversation painted a bleak picture. The participants shared that they lacked in coping skills, utilized negative coping skills, or just pushed uncomfortable feelings aside. This response from a 19-year-old junior provided the perspective that they have not been provided the appropriate education on how to positively cope with stress and adverse events:

> I think we have a lot put on our plate and people expect a lot of us and they expect us to have the tools to deal with it when oftentimes we aren't taught those tools and they expect us to figure it out on our own, but we aren't given the resources to figure out how to deal with it.

This additional insight by a 21-year-old senior explained how mental health stigma has interfered with the ability to develop positive coping behaviors.

I think for sure talking about mental health because we've never been taught coping

mechanisms either or anything because of the lack of talking about it. So I think people

get a lot better off if they were educated on how to work through it and be okay with that.

Some participants spoke about engaging in exercise, becoming closer with family, and

maintaining contact with friends through technology. For an 18-year-old freshman, engaging in

physical activity was her coping behavior.  She reflected, "Sports. Also, just like exercise my

body and release those endorphins after the fact."

The majority of participants could not identify positive coping behaviors resulting in the

use maladaptive coping behaviors such as avoidance, disengagement, and procrastination to deal

with uncomfortable feelings and stressors. A 21-year-old senior said, " I was borderline

alcoholic, I think. Not going to lie, I like...to get through anything, to even do a paper, I had to

drink to get through that. But I'm good now."  A 20-year-old junior  identified herself as having

maladaptive coping behavior that arose from fear saying, "I became afraid of things I couldn't

predict would happen, like another pandemic or school getting shut down again or not being able

to see my family, my friends. I started to detach a little bit."

**Impact of Social Support**

Participants identified overall reduced social support during the pandemic with markedly

diminished social support during the pandemic lockdown. Social support from family, friends,

school, and community are key factors in resilience with social isolation having a detrimental

impact on both physical and mental health (Southwick et al., 2016). Engaging with social

supports provides an opportunity to share thoughts and feelings, process events, and provide and

gain support. Participants could articulate the impact of social losses and the impact of not

seeing and interacting with friends and peers on their emotional and mental well-being. An 18-year-old freshman reflected:

> My best friend is literally down the street from me, and we call ourselves neighbors
> because we are like two houses down. Because our parents could get compromised (get
> Covid), specifically his mother, I couldn't just walk down there and go say hello.
> I feel like personally, for me, it got a lot better after we were able to actually see people.
> Because that was really hard for me. I just need that interaction.

This 19-year-old sophomore recognized the impact not socializing with friends had on her:

> I think I'm doing much better. My stress relief was going out on the weekends and
> hanging out with people and now that I can do that, my grades are much better. My
> emotional state and attitude towards life is much better.

Participants shared that connections with friends and peers were minimal beyond social media. Regarding family, several participants identified that their family connections grew stronger due to forced lockdown. A 20-year-old junior said:

> I feel like I've always been close to my parents and my family. But over the course of
> Covid felt like I grew closer to them. So moving four hours away was harder than I
> expected. I knew it was going to be hard.

**Loss of Academic Traditions and Closure**

One of the most common themes that emerged across the focus groups was the inability to engage in typical traditions like proms, graduation, and first-year college experiences. For this 20-year-old junior the losses of traditional events were significant:

> We didn't have a prom; we didn't have a senior prank. We didn't go out as a senior class. I'd even go as far as saying unfair because for most of us in this room, we lost both our senior year of high school and our freshman year of college, which are supposed to be two major years in your life. You're supposed to be able to do a lot in those years and we couldn't.

Additionally, this 20-year-old junior shared how beyond the loss of traditional events, transitional milestones also were impacted:

> I give tours and pretty much get asked the same question of what freshman year is like. I honestly, I don't know how to answer that because I didn't have a normal freshman year.

The loss of traditions and the inability to have closure from their high school life and entry into their collegiate life was expressed by many participants as detrimental to their emotional and mental well-being. However, participants also identified how this alternate experience has empowered them and provided them with a new perspective. According to this 20-year-old junior:

> I wrote a letter to Covid for one class and just said, 'I hate you. You stole all this from me. You robbed me of this.' And it was so healing. I think that is an important part of resilience-being able to address what you lost and work through and being able to understand you're okay and you can still be upset and angry about the things you lost.

Providing education and instruction that teaches students how to reframe adverse events and understand that challenges can provide an opportunity for growth and the promotion of resilience rather than the event only be viewed as detrimental.

**Instructor Support**

Participants were able to identify several positive elements of the study site that supported their resilience. Key elements that support resilience are developing connections and social supports. Each focus group consistently found the size of the college to be positive. This included individual attention from instructors and advisors and the class sizes. Numerous participants referred to peers who are attending larger schools and feeling lost in the lecture halls and not having relationships with their instructors. An 18-year-old freshman was especially appreciative of campus instructors, describing, "I may have been really lucky in this, but my professors have been really, really approachable."

While a 20-year-old junior discussed the importance of class size in terms of individual attention and connections with the instructors:

> I feel like we are already lucky enough to be in a small class size to where every classroom is like 20-25 or less, I feel like that is also pushing how lucky we are to have that close relationship with our professors.

As stated by a 21-year-old senior the importance of individual attention provides more than academic support:

> I think it's a little different for my major, I'm psychology criminal justice and human services. And in my experience, all of the teachers are like come to my office hours if you need any help and I show up and they actually help. That is very, what's the word? It gives me a confidence boost that they're here to help me and they're here to-they want to see me succeed and they'll take the extra half hour to go over a quiz that I completely bombed.

The perspective of instructor support providing a "confidence boost" contributes to self-esteem and self-efficacy which have been identified as factors in the development of resilience (Christmas & Khanlou, 2018).

**Support Services**

The most identified and discussed supportive element of the campus was student support services; this is included academic support as well as mental health support. Academic support services included tutoring services as well as the ability to seek assistance from the writing center. Participants identified not being able to receive these forms of services during their high school years. An 18-year-old freshman identified the importance of being able to receive these services early on in their college experience: It's like you can get the help before you have dug yourself this huge hole that you cannot get out of." The freshman and sophomore participants were especially appreciative of the academic support services. They saw the services as an opportunity to receive reassurance, as expressed by a 19-year-old sophomore:

> Simple reassurance.  It's like you are coming from high school to college and your expectations are talked about and you don't have a trial run like your first essay it's not like you have that ability to hand it in.  They are going to check over it and let me know because everyone comes from a different high school.  Like I wasn't taught certain writing strategies that the college or my professors are looking for so it's hard. We know what you are looking for but only to a certain point because you cannot expect someone to do it if they haven't learned it.  And it's hard to be universal, everyone hasn't learned these exact things. So, being able to go to the writing center and be like can you at least look over it.  So, it's a simple like confidence booster in a sense that I can do it I guess.

In regard to services that support student's increased mental health needs, a number of participants self-disclosed that they had utilized the campus counseling center. A number of other participants disclosed they currently utilize, or have utilized mental health services from their hometowns. The participants identified the counseling services being connected to both their experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic as well as other adverse events over their lifetime. While having counseling services on campus was seen as a positive, there were identified areas of improvement. The participants discussed the appreciation for having a therapist, however, they did not think one therapist for the campus was enough. A 19-year-old junior said "I definitely think there's not enough therapy options. I know a lot of people would love to talk about what they go through and their anxiety that they have from this pandemic." This reflection by a 21-year-old senior drove home the concern of not having enough counseling resources and how it affects not only the person who cannot receive services but the people who are receiving services:

> People feel guilty because there's only one person. You keep asking yourself, do I really
>
> need this? Because there's so many other people who need it and there's only one person.
>
> Because then it just creates more worry in session. Plus, how much can he handle?

Numerous participants discussed the need for increased mental health services on the campus as well as "space" to talk about mental health and emotional well-being. Participants suggested providing more education on mental health across campus (i.e., residence, athletics, instructors). They viewed education as a means to destigmatize mental health disorders and support struggling students. Participants identified campus clubs such as Active Minds and Morgan's Message which both focus on increasing awareness of mental health issues, destigmatize mental health, and promoting conversation around mental health issues in an open

and nonjudgmental manner. However, they expressed a need for a more open forum that allowed

students the space to come together and talk in general about how they are doing, the impact of

what they are experiencing, and a means to build connections and community on the campus. A

20-year-old junior identified the study itself as a positive, saying, "This has been helpful (the

focus group). I thought we were going to cry, and we were close, but it gave us the opportunity

to talk about this. We haven't talked about this, but we need to talk."

**Theory Development**

Grounded theory method culminates in the development of a theory grounded in the data.

It is important to identify the meaning of theory in regard to the end result of studies utilizing the

grounded theory method. Depending upon how the meaning of theory is identified, the resulting

theory takes a different form. The positivist viewpoint is that the resulting theory focuses on

identifying causes and explanations with the goal of providing a theory that may be generalizable

(Charmaz, 2006). In contrast, interpretative theories focus on "imaginative understanding of the

studied phenomenon" with "multiple realities; indeterminacy; facts and values as linked; truth as

provisional and social life as processional" (p. 126). Constructivist grounded theory seeks to

develop a substantive theory which Charmaz (2006) identifies as, "a theoretical interpretation or

explanation of a delimited problem in a particular area such as family relationships. Formal

organizations, or education" (p. 189). The theoretical development of the study resulted in two

theoretical models grounded in the data outlined in the findings section.

The first model (Figure 2) provides the story of the participants in regard to the impact of

the Covid-19 pandemic. Generation Z undergraduate students experienced an adverse event

(Covid-19 pandemic) leading to distress on a personal and academic level. On the personal level,

they experienced a disconnection from social support and social structures such as friends, peers,

educational instructors, and school and campus settings. The disconnection from support

structures, which are a bedrock of resilience, contributed to diminished mental health and

emotional well-being. Another important finding of this study related to academic competence.

Due to the educational disruption that the students experienced during both their high school and

college years, students were met with challenges to their learning including a perceived lack of

instruction, decreased motivation and decreased engagement in academics during the Covid-19

pandemic resulting in a decreased sense of academic competence among the study participants.

**Figure 2**

*Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Participants*
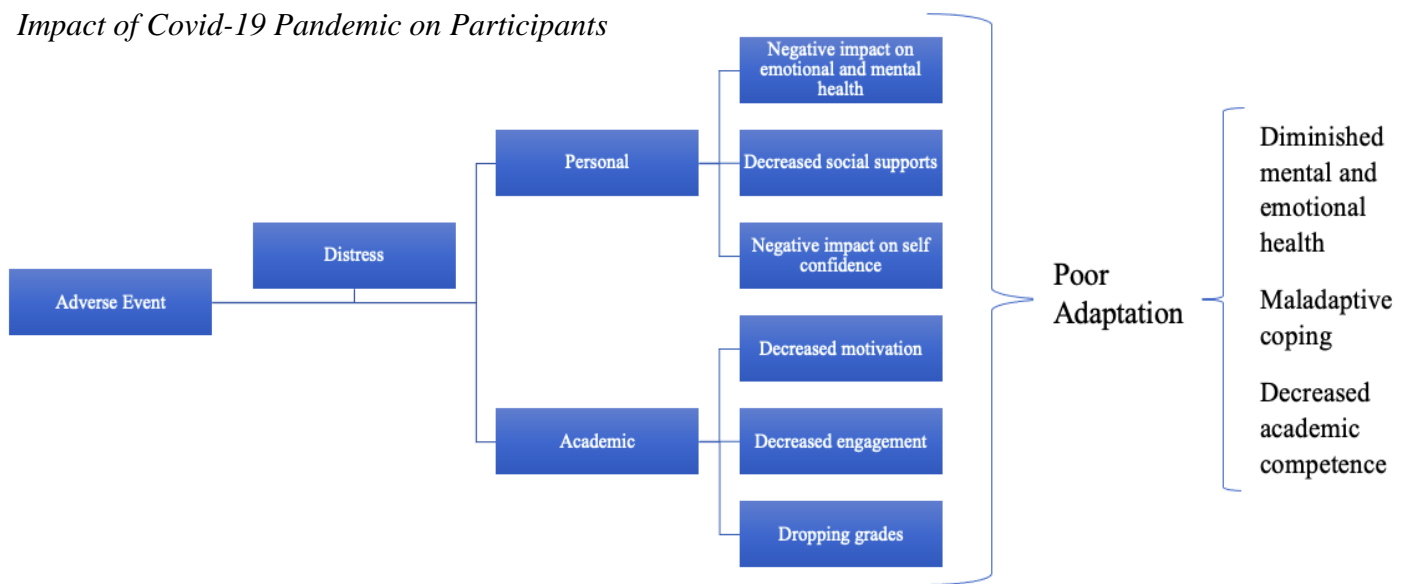


The second model, Figure 3, depicts the resources and supports that emerged from the

data that support a positive adaptation to adverse events, in this case the Covid-19 pandemic.

Participants identified resources and support both on and off the college campus. It is theorized

that the resources and supports that emerged from the data would promote positive adaptation

resulting in improved emotional and mental health, improved academics, and increased

educational persistence and retention of Generation Z undergraduate students.

**Figure 3**

*Participant Process of Resilience*
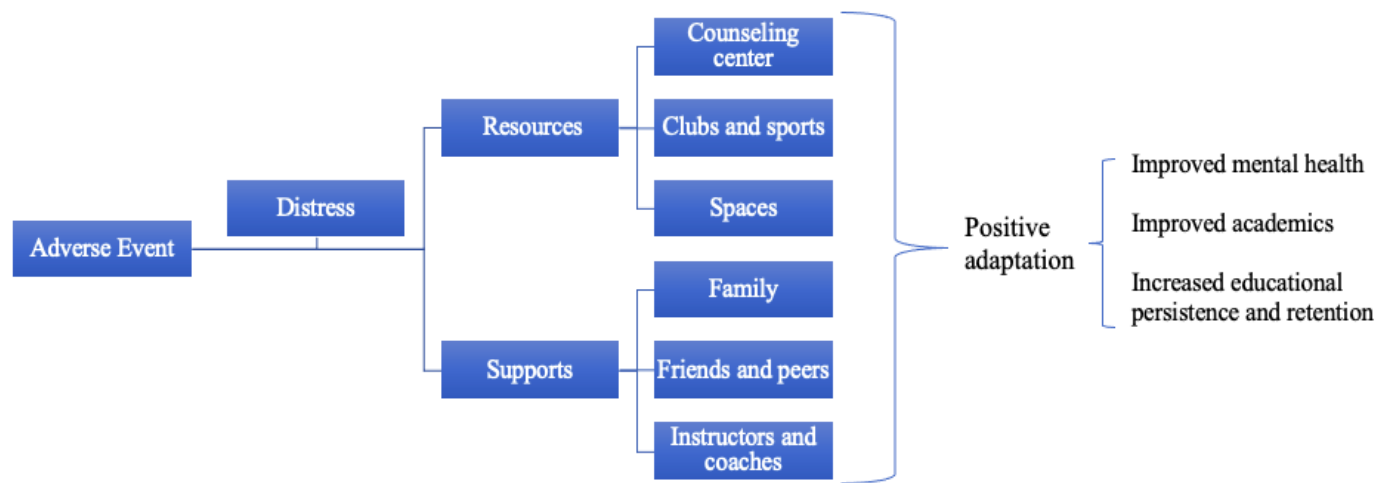


## Resilience Through Adversity

A final point of note is how participants perceived their resilience and its development. Luthar et al. (2000) identify resilience as "a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (pg.1). While the study participants defined resilience similar to the working definition, there is an interpretation that is not conceptualized in the literature regarding the understanding of resilience: the meanings of adverse events, and "positive adaptation" to the events. These questions of conceptualization surrounding resilience are not unique. Luthar et al. (2000) discusses these concerns as problematic in studies regarding resilience and cautions the need to further study the process of resilience and its components.

Adverse events and positive adaptation are subjective and relative. The adverse events described by the participants, framed in the Covid-19 pandemic, included: loss of supports, disruption to education, loss of traditional experiences. Additional stressors outside of the pandemic for participants included school shootings, gun violence, 9/11, wars, and climate change. Applying how the participants described their mental state, specifically with diminished

mental health and emotional wellness, to the working definition of the study, the question of positive adaptation arises. The participants viewed themselves as resilient due to the previous experience of adverse events, rather than how they have adapted. They viewed positive adaptation as still moving forward, a neutral event. This is in line with Rutter's (1987) challenge model that posits exposure to risks promotes the development of coping mechanisms that will later emerge as individuals are faced with challenges.

## Summary of Findings

This study sought to gain an understanding of Generation Z undergraduate students experience during the Covid -19 pandemic, the factors of resilience that have supported them during the pandemic and what elements on the college campus promote or impede their resilience. This was completed utilizing four focus groups consisting of a total of 30 Generation Z undergraduate students on a single college campus in the United States. The study found that participants reported mental and emotional distress both during the pandemic lockdown and as they have returned to campus due to fear of Covid-19 for themselves and family members, loss of traditional milestones, isolation from social supports and a lack of knowledge of positive coping behaviors to manage their mental and emotional distress. The Covid-19 pandemic was another in a series of adverse experiences that the participants identified as impacting their well-being and resilience. Adverse events such as gun violence episodes, 9/11, school shootings, and global crises have been prevalent throughout their childhood and early adulthood.

Regarding the elements on the college campus that support or impede resilience, study participants identified support services on the college campus as key to supporting resilience development in two areas: mental and emotional well-being and their academic preparedness. The study participants found services such as on campus counseling, academic writing center,

student tutors and positive relationships with instructors as key to supporting their resilience.

However, participants reported on campus counseling services as not being sufficient to provide

adequate treatment due to the campus having a single provider, with participants having

difficulty scheduling regular appointments due to availability in the counselor schedule.

**Chapter 5:  Analysis and Synthesis**

Undergraduate students are especially vulnerable to mental and emotional distress. As they enter, and progress through, their college experience, it is important to understand what factors of resilience support their ability to overcome challenges that arise and what college campuses can do to assist in promoting their resilience. Early research on the impact of the pandemic on undergraduate students finds that social isolation and fear of the pandemic had a negative impact on students' mental health (Babicka-Wirkus, 2021; Hajduk et al., 2022; Pat-Horenczyk et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021). Resilience has been shown to be a mediator between stress and mental health (Lara-Cabrera et al., 2021). Obtaining the students' perspective of their experiences and resilience will allow for an accurate assessment of their needs and development of appropriate interventions to address the identified needs. Research questions include:

R1: How did the Covid-19 pandemic impact Generation Z undergraduate college students?

R2: What factors of resilience supported students during the pandemic?

R3: What are the elements on college campuses that promote or impede resilience?

The study sought to identify the elements on the college campus that support or impede resilience.  Focus group participants identified support services on the college campus as being key to supporting resilience development in two areas: mental and emotional well-being as well as their academic preparedness.  Students identified services such as on campus counseling, academic writing center, student tutors and positive relationships with instructors as key to supporting their resilience. However, students reported on campus counseling services as not being sufficient to provide adequate treatment due to the campus having a single provider, with

students having difficulty scheduling regular appointments due to availability in the counselor schedule.

This chapter will provide an analysis and synthesis of the findings of the study. Salient features of the research will be discussed including connections made between the research findings and information obtained through the literature review process. The research questions will provide the framework for this chapter which will conclude with limitations of the study.

**Research Question 1**

The study's foundation centered on understanding Generation Z undergraduate students' experience during the Covid-19 pandemic. In response to the research question, "How did the Covid-19 pandemic impact Generation Z undergraduate students?" participants shared how the pandemic and mitigation efforts affected them on a personal and academic level. The study participants shared feelings of increased distress, worry, low mood and motivation. The responses were consistent with other studies that have examined undergraduate students' mental health during the pandemic. Current studies on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic have found that mental health of all individuals was negatively affected by the pandemic and associated mitigation efforts (Liu et al., 2021). Undergraduate students have been identified as being vulnerable to a negative impact from the Covid-19 pandemic. A 2021 study of Jordanian undergraduate students during quarantine found an increase in depression, anxiety, and stress amongst students surveyed (Hamaideh et al., 2022). This study was consistent with a study of Italian university students where students reported experiencing depression, sadness, panic, and anxiety during quarantine (Patrono et al., 2022). Similarly, in the United States, studies on undergraduate students during the pandemic have found that students have experienced diminished mental and emotional health, specifically experiencing higher levels of depression,

anxiety, and suicidality (CCMH, 2023; Ewing et al., 2022; Lipson et al., 2022; Tomaszek & Muchacka-Cymerman, 2022; Wang et al., 2020). Despite these concerning findings, there is research that is encouraging looking deeper into additional factors that may have contributed to diminished mental and emotional health. Ewing et al. (2022) studied psychological vulnerability of post-secondary students during the Covid-19 pandemic and found students with preexisting mental health conditions had better adaptation to the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic than individuals without preexisting conditions. Also, the study theorized this may be due to students with pre-existing mental health issues using positive coping behaviors they had previously learned (Ewing et al., 2022).

Study participants identified the negative impact the Covid-19 pandemic, and related mitigation efforts, had on their mental health as a predominant concern among, and across, all focus groups. Participants identified mental health symptomology of excessive worry, intrusive thoughts, and fear when looking towards their future. Concerns for their health, family member's health, loss of traditional milestones, and uncertainty of the future, all impacted participants mental health. The loss of traditions that mark an ending of one phase of life and the beginning of another phase such as graduations, proms, and traditional first year college experiences, all contributed to diminished mental health and emotional well-being. Connected to the loss of such events was the fear of hopefulness for future events. Validating the feelings of undergraduate students who have experienced this level of disruption will be a key piece in helping them heal as we move forward, and past, the Covid-19 pandemic.

The other predominant finding of this study was the how the participants perceive how their academic competence was impacted by the pandemic. Students identified factors that impacted their studies as not feeling they were receiving proper instruction, diminished

expectations of educational institutions, and student's decreased motivation and engagement. The connection between academics and mental health and emotional well-being is established in the literature as students who are able to manage their stress in a positive way are better able to focus and retain information (Tackacs et al., 2021). With the additional stressors added to students during the pandemic, they were especially vulnerable to lowered academic results. Decrease in academic performance was a common issue identified among students during the pandemic (Bisconer & McGill, 2022; Plakhotnik et al., 2021). Academic competence is positively correlated with resilience and one's ability to overcome challenges (Werner, 1995).

It is important to note, this study is not reflective of all undergraduate students. A key finding in a study by Ewing et al. (2022), found that students with pre-existing mental health issues, were able to identify positive aspects of the virtual learning citing a greater ability to focus online, reduced group work, feeling more comfortable in the virtual setting, and the increase in time alone provided opportunity for self-care.

**Research Question 2**

In response to the question "What factors of resilience supported students during the pandemic?" the participant answers were in line with factors identified in the literature that promote resilience and student educational persistence. As discussed in the literature review, factors of resilience exist at individual, family, and community levels. The most frequently identified factors at the individual level were self-esteem/self-worth, self-efficacy/reliance, belonging/connection/bonding, and emotional health/well-being/subjective well-being (Christmas & Khanlou, 2018). The family level included: connectedness, caring relations, and support (Christmas & Khanlou, 2018). With the community level identifying social inclusion, social justice, and community connectedness (Christmas & Khanlou, 2018). A number of these

factors were compromised during the pandemic.  The study results revealed direct connections to a number of these specific factors.

A 2021 study of undergraduate students' resilience during the pandemic identified that relationships with family, friends, and educators were found to support resilience development (Ang et al., 2022)  on resilience during the pandemic  Due to mitigation efforts that required social isolation, factors such as community connectedness, the ability to bond and connect with support structures such as family, friends, and school support structures, and the ability to develop new, and foster current, caring relationships were compromised.

It is important to note that the participants struggled to identify positive coping behaviors they utilized during the pandemic. The study participants pointed to not being taught coping skills. Additionally, they did not recognize the social connections that were still in place as a means to cope. Social connectedness during the pandemic lockdown was associated with lower levels of stress (Nitschke et al., 2021). While connections to family, school, and peers were compromised in the traditional sense, those connections did continue at some level. During pandemic lockdown, families were in their homes together with the potential to develop stronger bonds. Some participants did acknowledge gaining a closer connection with their family members; however, this was also recognized as stressful at times. Stress arose from increased roles and demands in the home as well as an increased recognition of caregiver stress in relation to the pandemic.

**Research Question 3:**

The question "What are the elements on college campuses that promote or impede resilience in undergraduate students?" the participants identified a number of elements on the campus that promote and impede resilience in undergraduate students.  In terms of the promotion

of resilience, the predominant element was instructor support. Social supports, which includes instructors, are known to be pivotal in resilience development. Instructor support was followed by support services including counseling and academic support services such as tutoring and the writing center. These findings are consistent with a study by Plakhotnik et al. (2021) of university students in France, Germany, Russian and the United Kingdom, that found students were in need in an increase in support services to promote well-being and the services should be made a "priority" (p. 1) on campuses. Additionally, the findings are supported by a pre-pandemic study by Holdsworth, et al. (2018) of what undergraduate and graduate students' needs from their campus to support resilience development and promote educational persistence, where students identified three relationships that provided a positive educational experience and resilience development:  campus environment, curriculum is structured and conveyed, and the student-instructor relationship.

The study participants identified instructor support as promoting resilience development. Instructors are being required to do more with less as declining enrollments and increasing demands with both academic and nonacademic duties are pulling educators thin. A qualitative study by Parizeau (2022) found instructors having contrasting perspectives of undergraduate student mental health. While the study found that some instructors are support and attempting to create an inclusive, supportive environment for their students, other instructors are dismissive of student mental health concerns and find they distract from the classroom and place strain on the instructor to accommodate for student mental health needs (Parizeau, 2022).

Academic support services are in demand by students. It can be noted that while students identified support services, in particular academic support services, many of the students admitted to not utilizing the services, but identified knowing it was available as a positive.

An impediment to resilience development identified by the participants included lack of

resources to fully support the level of need of students. Students identified that mental health was

a significant issue on the college campus. Mental health is being referred to as a crisis on college

campuses with colleges being unable to keep up with student demand (Abrams, 2022). At the

time of the study, the participants had one mental health provider on campus. While a number of

participants reported they currently, or in the past, engaged in the services on campus, other

participants reported the difficulty scheduling due to the counselor availability was a roadblock.

This finding was consistent with information from the 2022 CCMH report that increasing

counselor caseloads resulted in students' inability to be seen in a timely, consistent, manner

resulting in students having lower levels of symptom improvement. Higher education institutions

need to act in a proactive manner with student mental health by expanding current services,

adding additional services such as peer support services and telehealth, and develop campus

multidisciplinary mental health teams to review needs as well as current and potential services to

support student mental health (Patterson et al., 2021).

**Implications of the Study**

Resilience supports students' ability to meet educational challenges in a positive manner.

A potential implication of the study is colleges gaining information that may provide campus

administrators with a better understanding of factors related to student persistence and retention.

Students' decision to persist in their education is dependent upon how well they adjust to their

environment and challenges they encounter (Ainscough et al., 2018). Statistics from the

Education Data Initiative (2022) report 15.9 million undergraduate students were enrolled in the

fall of 2020 representing a 4.3% decline in enrollment. Of enrolled students, 92% of college

students range in age between 18-24 years old. In the United States the dropout rate for

undergraduate college students is up to 32.9%, with 24.1% of 2019-2020 dropouts consisting of freshman (Education Data Initiative, 2022). Some of the identified reasons for dropout include financial issues, lack of academic readiness, poor social fit, low family support, mental/emotional issues, health issues, and distance from home (Hanson, 2022). According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2020), of the students who entered higher education in the fall of 2018, 75.9% of the students persisted at any institution while 67% were retained at the school they began. Tinto (2017), reflected that schools need to understand the student perspective of persistence. An understanding of what schools can do to encourage persistence in their students to not only want to be at school but also to retain the student to complete their education at their school (Tinto, 2017). Gaining an understanding from the students' perspective on their resilience may provide insight into why they leave or change schools and what can be done to prevent their departure.

Individuals who develop resilience will be better equipped to navigate and overcome stressful and challenging events without the use of maladaptive coping skills (Leipold & Greve, 2009; Masten & Obradovic, 2006). As stress has an impact on individual well-being and academic performance (Hartley, 2013), it is important to find positive means for students to manage their stress. Generation Z undergraduate students are reporting higher levels of mental health issues relative to other generations. The increase in mental health issues amongst undergraduate students was a concern before the Covid-19 pandemic and it seems to have worsened during the pandemic. Gaining an understanding how college campuses can partner with students to assist them in the development of resilience to manage their challenges in a positive manner may lead to overall student health, well-being, and improved academic performance with the potential to have a positive impact on educational persistence and student

retention. As colleges are reviewing the effectiveness of services they currently provide, and attempting to understand what additional services they may support mental health needs gaining insight from students directly on what services they utilize and find beneficial and effective will provide campus administrators a path forward on how to optimize the services they currently have or discontinue services that are deemed ineffective or not being utilized by students. This benefit sheds light on a gap in the research that student perspective is necessary to gain an understanding of the wants and needs of students to better inform policies and practices that can support student success.

Additionally, the value of the study is it provides insight into Generation Z perspectives on resilience, experiences during the pandemic that have impacted them, and insight into the services provided by college campuses they deem beneficial. Gaining insight into the students' perspectives may assist clinicians' understanding of their needs and how best to reach this generation. As mentioned, members of Generation Z may recognize the need for mental health services but do not seek treatment. The ability to gain an understanding of how to reach members of this generation in an effective and meaningful manner has the potential to inform interventions and educational resources that may reduce stigma which is a deterrent for help seeking behavior.

**Limitations of the Study**

There are several limitations and delimitations recognized in this study. Despite the identified limitations and delimitations of this study, the information gathered may provide relevant information to the research site on their students as well as providing an understanding of the students' educational and emotional needs. Additionally, the information can be a starting point to inform further research on Generation Z undergraduate student resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic. This is beneficial to both academia and social work as both fields seek to

understand the needs of Generation Z undergraduate students in order to improve educational

persistence and how best to support their mental health and emotional well-being.

The specificity of the research setting presents a barrier to the transferability of the

findings. This study took place at a single, small, private college in upstate New York. During

the pandemic, New York State had significant mitigation efforts that may have played a role in

the students' experience. The students who are participating in the study may not have had a

similar experience to other Generation Z undergraduate students. The participants were a

convenience sample and are not statistically representative of the larger population of Generation

Z undergraduate students. According to Luker, (2010), regarding sampling, the subjects of the

study are not meant to be" representative of the larger population, but of the larger phenomenon"

(p. 103).

The researcher recognizes the utilization of focus groups presents several potential areas

of concern. Recognized limitations of focus groups include the influence of groupthink on

participants' individual thoughts and opinions, participation within the group setting and need for

group facilitator to conduct the group in an objective, even manner (Rubin & Babbie, 2017).

Another limitation was the potential for social desirability bias. As the researcher is an instructor

at the college with the potential to having taught, currently teaching, or teaching in the future the

participants, the potential existed that the participants may have felt compelled to give responses

that they believed would make them look favorable in the researcher's eyes.

The sample for the study was small. While the focus groups had an appropriate number

of participants in each group, the researcher would have preferred conducting additional focus

groups to ensure the researcher was able to capture additional perspectives. Additionally, the

focus groups took place within a two-week period of time early in the school year.  Ideally, the

researcher would have preferred to conduct the focus groups at the end of the first school term. As the school term progresses, students tend to become more stressed over the workload and their grades. Gathering their perspectives on their resilience and coping behaviors during a period of time when they are feeling a higher level of stress may have yielded different data in terms of their identification of coping behaviors.

The demographics of the participants collected was limited. The researcher initially began with multiple questions regarding demographics; however, these were reconsidered, and the researcher limited the demographics. In hindsight, this researcher would have asked additional questions regarding academic major, race, and if the participants had previously received mental health treatment. With specific regard to previous treatment, this researcher believes it would have contributed to the findings due to the participants reporting minimal knowledge on coping skills and literature that arose after findings that found individuals who had previous treatment experience had better outcomes during the Covid-19 pandemic.  Additionally, the sample was self-selected. Individuals who participated may not be representative of the larger Generation Z undergraduate student population. As this study was not meant to be generalizable, this does not pose a significant threat to the validity of the study. However, it would be negligent to not mention this limitation is recognized by the researcher.

Finally, grounded theory is a time-consuming method that has received criticism for its lack of actual theory generation, varied interpretations, generalizability, and level of potential for researcher bias. A review of social work doctoral dissertations utilizing grounded theory method found grounded theory method is being used for exploratory and analytic purposes more so than theory development (Akesson et al., 2018). As discussed earlier, there are varied interpretations of grounded theory method without clear cut directives on how to conduct, or what constitutes, a

grounded theory method study. An additional limitation in regard to utilizing grounded theory

method is due to the time limitation of this study, at times the researcher felt rushed in terms of

needing to code in a swift manner between the closely scheduled focus groups. Grounded theory

method typically would allow for additional time where the researcher would be able to

continuously recruit participants. Despite this as a recognized limitation, the researcher does not

believe it took away from the study.

## Chapter 6: Recommendations and Conclusion

**Recommendations for Study and Practice**

Further research needs to be conducted on the impact of the pandemic. This study identified Generation Z mental health and academic competence as being detrimentally impacted by the pandemic. As we move further away from the pandemic, gaining an understanding of the long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health of Generation Z students will be beneficial for developing interventions that may be implemented to promote resilience during adverse events. A longitudinal study that follows students who had their high school and/or undergraduate education disrupted may be beneficial in tracking their mental health, in addition to their feelings of academic readiness and competency and identifying factors of resilience that supported them as they moved through their education. Such a study would benefit from more directed sampling to gather perspectives of students of various racial and ethnic groups as well as students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

To address concerns of academic preparedness of incoming college students, a recommendation is made for colleges to conduct assessments on students to ascertain their academic competence. This information can provide valuable insight on how instructors can best meet the needs of students in the classroom while providing campus academic support services an understanding of the level of need for students so they may respond adequately. Additionally, it has the potential to provide validation to students who do not feel confident in their academic skills by providing them the message that we recognize the challenges they have encountered, the impact of the challenges, and the school is committed to building their academic competence so they may have a positive academic experience. Of further benefit would be for colleges to begin this process with the high schools of prospective students. Coordination between the high

school and the college could be beneficial in developing a proactive plan with incoming students which can benefit both student and college.

To increase awareness and educate faculty and staff on college campuses on how to support and respond to mental health issues on campus, developing a position that oversees education and intervention services can be beneficial to the campus community. Social workers could act as liaisons that provide education services to instructors, administrators, and campus staff. Knowledge of mental health disorders and recognizing the signs of mental health issues varies among instructors. Educators are not required, or expected, to be experts in mental health. However, requiring staff to engage in training to improve their understanding of mental health could go a long way in how they engage and support students in their classroom and their advisees. Mandated training exists on other topics on college campuses such as Title IX, campus safety, discrimination policies, and bias. Developing a training module or an employee workshop on the signs of a student struggling with a mental health issue, when and how to respond, and best practice in classrooms, including appropriate language, would be beneficial to both educators and students.

Stigma surrounding mental health continues to deter individuals from seeking help. Educating students on mental health and positive coping behaviors may have a positive impact on resilience development and assist administrators as they attempt to manage available resources on college campuses. Social workers could be utilized to develop and provide mental health prevention and education programs to help college campuses reduce the stigma of mental health. Providing education on mental health can break down the stigma that exists around the subject of mental health resulting in students being willing to reach out for help before their symptoms reach an unmanageable level and are negatively impacting their functioning. Students

would benefit from a program that normalizes feelings and emotions that develop as a result of day-to-day stress they may experience. Additionally, social work professionals could work collaboratively with college campuses and students to develop programs specifically targeted to this population. Implementing educational opportunities on mental health and positive coping behaviors as part of the campus culture can benefit the students by providing them with the tools and resources necessary to manage stressors and challenges in a healthy manner rather than utilizing maladaptive coping skills that often arise from stress. The ability to manage stress in a positive manner, without need for professional intervention, may lessen the burden on campus counseling centers to meet the increasing mental health demands of students.

Finally, assessment is key to successful social work practice. Ensuring that the field of social work provides thorough, and encourages ongoing, education to students and social workers in the field on issues related to the unique experiences of generational cohorts is imperative to provide appropriate assessments and intervention development. This study made clear that Generation Z had a number of experiences that impacted them in a variety of ways. The impact of these experiences upon Generation Z may differ greatly from how other generations were impacted by the same experiences. This will be particularly important to keep in mind as we continue to study the impact of the pandemic on all generational cohorts.

## Conclusion

This study provided an opportunity to engage in a dialogue with Generation Z undergraduate students on how they were impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, explore factors of resilience they utilized during the pandemic, and gain insight into elements they perceive as supporting or impeding resilience development on the college campus. The study participants identified the pandemic as having a detrimental impact upon not only their mental health, but

also their academic competence. As colleges have returned to pre-pandemic levels of operation, it is imperative that they provide appropriate and sufficient support services to assist students in developing resilience to face challenges in a healthy manner as they attempt to come to terms with the impact of the pandemic. Generation Z undergraduate student mental health is being recognized as a predominant concern on college campuses. Campuses were struggling to meet the mental health needs of students prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, and student needs have only intensified since the beginning of the pandemic. This study opened a dialogue. Generation Z undergraduate students are a vulnerable population and supporting their resilience development is essential for them to develop skills necessary to meet challenges in a healthy, positive manner. This study provides an opportunity for social workers to highlight how they can be of service to supporting the needs of colleges and their students through education and intervention.

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**Appendix A**

**Invitation to Participate E-mail**

Elmira College students are invited to participate in a study of undergraduate students' resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic.  The aim of this study is to explore undergraduate students' resilience, gain insight into the lived experience of undergraduate students during the pandemic including student experiences over the past two years during the pandemic, and how college campuses can support students as they make a return to campus or come to campus for the first time.

The study will take place on campus in the form of focus groups.  Each class year is provided a different date/time for the group.

Freshman- 9/22/22 @11:30-1pm
Sophomore- 9/28/22 @6-7:30pm
Junior-     9/29/22 @11:30-1pm
Senior-      10/6/22 @11:30-1pm

The focus groups will take place in the President's Dining Room at the Campus Center.  A catered meal will be provided and those who participate will be compensated with a $25 gift card.  The maximum number of participants in each focus group will be ten (10).

If you wish to participate, or have further questions, please contact me via email so I may go over more details of the study including consent procedures, risk issues, etc.

My email is:  kesmith@elmira.edu

Thank you,

Professor Kelly Smith

**Appendix B**

**Consent Form**

As a student of Elmira College, you are invited to participate in a research study being conducted through Elmira College in collaboration with Kutztown University.  I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before you decide whether or not you want to participate in the study.  The College requires that you give your signed agreement if you choose to participate. This study is being conducted by Kelly Smith, MSW, LCSW (Principal Investigator), Assistant Professor of Human Services at Elmira College.  This study is being utilized as Professor Smith's dissertation towards her Social Work Doctorate through Kutztown University.

**Title of the Study:** Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Their Resilience

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this study is to explore undergraduate student resilience. This study will provide insight in how students perceive their resilience, how resilience impacts their mental health and well-being, academic and campus engagement, retention and educational persistence,  identify programs and services that support the development of resilience, and make recommendations how college campuses can support the development and/or promotion of student resilience.  This study will be conducted through the utilization of focus groups with undergraduate students from Elmira College.

**Procedures:** If you agree to participate in this study, we ask you to participate in an in-person focus group to provide an in-depth exploration of factors leading to the development of resilience, formal and informal programs and services used by students that may promote student resilience, and overall well-being, challenges students experience related to accessing formal and

informal services, and suggestions to improve existing services or new services that may benefit

undergraduate students. The focus group is expected to last approximately 90 minutes.  The

focus group will be audio recorded via Apple iPhone and MacBook audio application to allow

researchers the ability to transcribe the discussion for the purpose of analysis.

**Risks or Discomforts, and Benefits of Being in the Study**: Minimal risk is associated with this

study.  Risk identified is the potential for emotional or mental discomfort related to the

discussion of risk and protective factors that may be discussed by students in regard to resilience

development or mental health related issues.  Benefits associated with this study include a

financial incentive for participation ($25 gift card) as well as the personal satisfaction of

contributing to improve current and future services and service delivery to students of Elmira

College.

**Confidentiality and Anonymity:** Records will be kept private and will be handled in a

confidential manner.  In any report or presentation, we will not include any information that will

make it possible to identify a research study participant. You will remain anonymous.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation is voluntary, refusal to participate will involve no

penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled, and you may discontinue

participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Contacts and Questions:**

Kelly Smith, MSW, LCSW, Assistant Professor
Department of Human Services of Elmira College
E-mail:  kesmith@elmira.edu

If you have questions later regarding the research study, you may contact the researcher listed

above.  If you have any questions or concerns about the rights of research participants, please

contact the Elmira College Human Research Review Board via Dr. Ping Zheng

at pzheng@elmira.edu or the IRB Committee at Kutztown University at 484-646-4167.

**Compensation:** Each participant will receive a $25 gift card for participating in this study.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the information described above and have received a copy of this information.  I have

asked questions I had regarding the research study and have received answers to my

satisfaction.  I am 18 years of age or older and voluntarily consent to participate in this study.

_____

_
 Signature of Participant                                           Date

*Thank you for your participation*

**Appendix C**

**Demographics**

Class year: (circle one) Freshman    Sophomore    Junior    Senior

Age: _____

Sex: _____

Gender identification: _____

First generation student: (circle one) Yes    No

Are you employed: (circle one) Yes    No
      If yes, full time, part-time? _____

Student Athlete: (circle one) Yes    No

**Appendix D**

**Debriefing Statement**

Thank you for your participation in this study.  The goal of this study was to explore

undergraduates' perceptions of their resilience through the use of focus group discussions.

During the focus groups, you were asked open-ended questions on your perception of resilience,

stress, coping skills, campus services, engagement practices, mental health and wellness. Due to

the sensitive nature of the topics that were discussed (i.e., coping skills, mental health, adverse

events, etc.), you are urged to reach out for support if you are feeling distress over anything that

may have been discussed during the group. At the bottom of this letter, you will find phone

numbers for support services available to you.

Your participation is greatly appreciated. The information you shared will provide insight on

undergraduate student resilience here at Elmira College. The information gained may be utilized

to modify or develop programs and interventions that may promote student resilience.

Again, thank you for your time and participation in the study. If you have any questions,

concerns or comments about this study, please feel free to reach out to me via email at:

kesmith@elmira.edu

Thank you!

Kelly Smith, MSW, LCSW

Support service numbers:

Clark Health Center:  606-735-1750
National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

In event of an afterhours emergency or mental health crisis please contact: the Residence Life

Coordinator on duty or Campus Security at 607-735-1777

**Appendix E**

**Interview Guide**

When you hear the term "resilient" what comes to mind?

What do you think contributes to your resilience?

What do you think interferes in building your resilience?

How do you think the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted you (personally, academically)?

How have you handled stress over the past two years?

What elements of campus life do you think help promote your resilience?

What would you change about campus life, services, classes, that you think would be beneficial to your personal well-being and help promote your resilience?

**Table 1**

**Participant demographics**

| Class year | Median age | Number of participants | Sex identity-Male | Sex identity-Female |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Freshman | 18 | 6 | 1 | 5 |
| Sophomore | 19 | 9 | 0 | 9 |
| Junior | 20 | 9 | 2 | 7 |
| Senior | 21 | 6 | 0 | 6 |

**Table 2**

**Initial Codebook**

| Descriptions | Codes |
|---|---|
| • Overcoming adversity and challenges<br>• Bouncing back<br>• Adversity necessary to be resilient<br>• Pushing through<br>• Adapting after challenges | Resilience meaning to students |
| • Support systems<br>• Friends, family, teachers<br>• Collective experiences<br>• Resources (financial, social status)<br>• Having self esteem<br>• Finding meaning in school, life<br>• Overcoming trauma history<br>• Faith<br>• Setting boundaries<br>• Sports-being on a team<br>• Physical activity/ exercise | Students' perspective on what supports and builds resilience |
| • Negative people<br>• Traumatic experiences<br>• Lack of support<br>• Social media<br>• lack of competence (being taught)<br>• Confusing messages | Students' perspective on what is harmful or damaging to |
| • Increased mental health issues<br>• Feeling hopeless<br>• Lack of supports<br>• Confusing messages<br>• Lack of education<br>• Disconnection from family/friends/teachers<br>• Fear of being sick/family<br>• Anxiety<br>• Lack of resources for school<br>• Loss of traditional experiences (graduation, prom, etc.)<br>• Unable to find joy | Student experiences during Covid |

| | |
|---|---|
| • Increase in responsibilities (parental roles)<br>• Using maladaptive coping<br>• Loss of routine and structure<br>• Anger-of leaders, of losses, lack of help | |
| • Worsened preexisting conditions<br>• Grief over loss of "normal"<br>• Grief over loss of social connections<br>• Reliant on social medial for information and support but also took to dark places<br>• Anxiety lingering over fear of it coming back and having to go back to virtual/leave school<br>• "PTSD" referenced multiple times<br>• No longer engaging with activities they enjoyed<br>• Depression<br>• Anxiety | Mental health resulting from pandemic experience |
| • Weren't taught<br>• Teachers not present<br>• Unrealistic expectations from schools<br>• Not prepared for further education<br>• Technology not available/working | Academics during Covid |
| • Worsened with Covid-depression and anxiety<br>• Never learned coping skills<br>• Stigma continues<br>• People pleasing<br>• Worse than other generations<br>• Traumas (Covid, gun violence, exposure to shootings, 9/11, bomb threats, Sandy Hook)<br>• Disengages rather than works through problems<br>• Shutting down<br>• Social media impact-positive and negative | Generation Z mental health |

| | |
|---|---|
| • Feel dismissed<br>• Feeling guilty over having MH issues<br>• Afraid will be sent away if talk about it | |
| • Don't tolerate social injustice<br>• Pushed to use technology<br>• Desensitized from traumas<br>• Want to change the world<br>• Missed out of "fun times" older adults experienced<br>• Conditioned to be negative<br>• Afraid to ask for help<br>• See selves as tougher than other generations because of experiences | Generation Z traits |
| • Support services (writing, tutoring)<br>• On campus counselor<br>• Therapy dogs<br>• Activities<br>• Clubs<br>• Dorms<br>• Small campus<br>• Small classes<br>• Professors that are "human"<br>• Sports<br>• Morgan's Message, Active Minds | Campus positives |
| • More counselors-1 is not enough<br>• Opportunities to build community on campus<br>• Space to discuss MH openly on campus<br>• Training for RAs on MH<br>• Mandatory screenings/check ins on MH status for all students<br>• Professors being more supportive -explaining, absent, providing information<br>• School providing clear guidance on Covid policy | Student identified needs/wants |

| | |
|---|---|
| • Professors being flexible with absences<br>• Less technology<br>• New learning platform<br>• Funding for current clubs/programs | |