Building Resilient Business Students: Faculty as Servant Leaders

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the normal cadence of life. These disruptions affected students in higher education in many ways as well increasing the stress and anxiety levels of college students and having a considerable negative impact on their mental health. Business students were not exempt from the negative mental health impact of COVID-19. Aware of the stress its students are experiencing, higher education can play a role in creating environments that support learning and the development of skills to rebound from that adversity. This is particularly true for business schools who are also monitoring how business itself is being affected and conducted during this pandemic Business schools are not only positioned to support the mental health of their students but also to prepare them to be successful in a business world that is transforming at the same time (Krishnamurthy, 2020). One important way universities can support their students and enhance the students' positive response to adversity is to focus on the development of resilience. The problem this article will address is how business school faculty can help students develop resiliency so that they can be successful now and in their future careers. Specifically, how faculty exhibiting servant leadership characteristics can improve the resilience of their students and better prepare them to respond to adversities like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Resilience, Servant Leadership, COVD-19, Higher Education

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the normal cadence of life. Where work was performed, where meals were taken, and where learning occurred all changed, in some ways dramatically. Our ability to interact and engage with others was also impacted. The isolation created by the need to social distance and the accompanying quarantine placed significant stress on individuals around the world

(Killgore et al., 2020; Polizzi et al., 2020). These disruptions affected students in higher education in many ways as well (Ali, 2020; Charissi et al., 2020; Sonet al., 2020; Tasso et al., 2021). Students who lived in campus housing were sent home, social activities like athletic events and graduation were cancelled or moved online, and social distancing requirements forced a shift to online and distance learning. The shift to online learning was a particularly difficult transition for students because in many ways neither they nor their faculty was prepared for the sudden shift nor the technological challenges it would present (Ali, 2020; Charissi et al., 2020; Krishnamurthy, 2020; Tasso et al., 2021). In addition, students struggled with motivation after the shift to online classes, which negatively impacted their performance (Zia, 2020). These challenges, in addition to the health fears related to the COVID-19 virus itself, increased the stress and anxiety levels of college students and had a considerable negative impact on their mental health (Son, 2020; Tasso et al., 2021).

Business students are uniquely impacted by COVID-19. Not only are business students experiencing abnormal anxiety produced from the months of required confinement (Garvey et al., 2021), but they must also be concerned with understanding how business itself is being affected during and after this pandemic (Krishnamurthy, 2020). Businesses have made wide sweeping changes, including change in workplace structures and foundational business models in record time (Li et al., 2020; Rocha et al., 2020). Given these significant shifts to how businesses run and the questioning of basic business model assumptions, it is understandable if students worry additionally that their education will be outdated and insufficient to prepare them for the changing workplace. Aware of the stress its students are experiencing, higher education can play a role in creating environments that support learning and the development of skills to rebound from that adversity (Charissi, 2020). Business schools are not only positioned to support the mental health of their students but also prepare them to be successful in a business world that is transforming.

One important way universities can support their students and enhance the students' positive response to adversity is to focus on the development of resilience (First et al., 2018; Holdsworth et al., 2018; Martin & Marsh, 2006; Masten et al., 2018). The problem this article will address is how business schools can help students develop resiliency so that they can be successful now and in their future careers. While the importance of resilience development and the many different developmental approaches universities can implement will be discussed below in detail, the primary focus of this article is the key role faculty can play in developing resilience in students (Ahmed et al., 2018; Brewer et al., 2019; Frisby et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2006). Specifically, we will examine how faculty exhibiting servant leadership characteristics, such as listening, empowering, or building community, can improve the resilience of their students and better prepare them to respond to adversities like the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, we will recommend that business schools encourage the development of servant leadership behaviors in their faculty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Resilience and Servant Leadership in Higher Education

This literature review and concept paper are intended to generate new understanding of a timely and important topic, provide practical recommendations for business schools on how to equip their faculty to serve their students during times of adversity, and be a catalyst for future research on enhancing resilience in business students. Articles were identified through database searches on Business Source Elite-EBSCO and Google Scholar. The primary keyword search terms included COVID-19, resilience, resiliency, servant leadership, faculty, academics, and higher education. Citations and reference lists from these articles were also used to identify other articles and create a comprehensive list of articles to review. In total, over 100 articles and book chapters were reviewed in the preparation of this analysis. Literature was selected for inclusion based on its relevancy to the theories and practices under review, specifically student resilience and faculty servant leadership within higher education. The content analysis of the literature framed the overall theme and drove the structure of this article from the adversity created by the COVID-19 pandemic, to the value of resiliency in responding to that adversity, to how resilience impacts students in higher education, to the characteristics of a servant leader, and finally the concept formation defined by the relationship between faculty servant leadership behaviors and resilience in their students.

Resilience

Resilience research goes back over 60 years to just after the end of World War II (Yates et al., 2015). Modern resilience research has its roots in the 1970's studies of at-risk children who developed well in the face of adversity, trauma, or risk (Masten, 2001). Resilience is defined as "patterns of positive adaption during or following significant adversity or risk" (Masten et al., 2009). Although early research credited resiliency to certain traits, later research indicated resilience is something rather common, a phenomenon found in most, if not, all people, not a rarity found in only a select few (PeConga et al., 2020). Thus, research began on how resiliency could be developed.

The recent study of resilience has helped to rekindle the tenets of positive psychology introduced by Martin Seligman (Seligman, 1999). Seligman encouraged a pursuit to understand and encourage the human strengths that could prevent mental illness, not just treat or cure it. In the same vein, the study of resiliency seeks to transform a commonly prescribed intervention model based on deficits to one focused on protective and redemptive resources (Masten, 2001; Luthar et al., 2014; Yates et al., 2015). "The overarching goal of resilience-informed practice is to foster positive adaption and development in contexts of high risk or adversity" (Yates et al., 2015, p 777).

Resilience is often expressed as an asset, a capacity that can be called upon when addressing adversity (Masten, 2001; Rutter, 1993). Fortunately, research has found that this asset can be developed and enhanced in individuals (Masten et al.,

2009; McAllister & McKinnon, 2008; Walker et al., 2006). Rutter describes resilience development in a medical context, where resistance to the infection is developed through exposure to, and experience with, overcoming a pathogen (1993). This analogy vividly illustrates the value of intentionally building resilience. Like administering a vaccine to prepare for disease exposure, developing the asset of resilience makes individuals better prepared to respond to adversity they may face. One researcher, while acknowledging that resilience could still be enhanced even after the adversity occurs, stated it is better "to enhance resilience before the trauma occurs" (Southwick et al., 2014, p. 11).

Importantly, for resilience to be present there must be some form of adversity or highly stressful event (Mancini & Bonanno, 2009). The COVID-19 pandemic is an adverse event that has triggered the need for a resilient response in individuals (Barton et al., 2020; Dvorsky et al., 2020; PeConga et al., 2020; Polizzi et al., 2020). So much so that, increasing resilience in individuals has been advocated as a primary public health concern (Killgore et al., 2020). Thus, an opportunity presents itself, especially to educators, to capitalize on this highly stressful experience as a means to learn a highly valued and sought after skill of resilience.

Resilience in Academics

Higher education literature has developed a growing interest in resilience (Brewer et al., 2019). This developed interest is timely because schools are in a unique position to influence the resilience of their students (Masten et al., 2008). It is also timely because the need for resilience in students existed even before the COVID-19 pandemic struck as evidenced by a Psychology Today blog headline which declared, "Declining Student Resilience: A Serious Problem for Colleges" (Gray, 2015). Much of the pre-COVID research on resilience in higher education focused on the increase stress and pressure students are bearing and suggested higher levels of resilience as a response to that adversity (First et al., 2018; Goemez Molinero et al., 2018; Holdsworth et al., 2018).

Resilience contributes to student success. In the academic setting, resilience is a construct defined as the student's "ability to deal effectively with academic setbacks, stress, and study pressure" (Martin, 2002, p. 35). Academic resilience has been associated with positive behaviors and outcomes for students. Martin and Marsh found academic resilience predicts the academic outcomes of class participation, enjoyment of school, and general self-esteem (2006). Academic resilience positively impacts academic engagement and motivation in students (Ahmed et al., 2018). Increasing resilience in students better prepares them to face adversity and trauma in the academic setting.

Business schools not only have the current obligation to support students in their academic endeavors but also to prepare them to be successful in their future workplaces. This includes the implementation of interventions that develop student resilience skillsets. Business publications have explored the value of resilience in the workplace and the importance of developing it in an organization's workforce (Coutu, 2002; Seligman, 2011). Management scholars have also researched resilience, its value to business, and the importance of its development

(Linnenluecke, 2017). The value that business is beginning to place on resilient employees should encourage business schools to focus on its development in their students. Doing so would better prepare students to thrive in their future workplace (McAllister & McKinnon, 2008). Moreover, even the transition from school to work is itself a stressful situation that warrants a resilient response, highlighting its importance in preparing students to succeed (Tusaie & Dyer, 2004).

Resilience in the Workplace

Organizational behavioral scholars responded to Seligman's encouragement to focus on positive psychology by delineating the core concepts that could positively affect individuals at work and their organizations. Positive organizational behavior is defined as "the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today's workplace" (Luthans, 2002b, p. 59). In studying positive organizational behavior, Luthans identified a high-level construct he termed Psychological Capital (PsyCap), consisting of four lower level components: hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (2002b).

As a component of PsyCap, resilience is defined as "the positive psychological capacity to rebound, to 'bounce back' from adversity, uncertainty, conflict, failure or even positive change, progress and increased responsibility" (Luthans, 2002a, p. 702). Using this framework and definition, resilience has been shown to have a positive impact on the workplace and produce desirable outcomes for employers (Dhiman & Arora, 2018; Mache et al., 2012; Youssef & Luthans, 2007). This makes resilience a capacity that can improve an organization's performance and is therefore desirable to business (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011). Companies, through development activities, can increase the resilience capacity of their workforce (Bardoel et al., 2014).

As an aside, PsyCap has also been studied in higher education and positively related to an increase in student engagement (Luthans et al., 2015). PsyCap was found significantly related to academic performance in business students (Luthans et al., 2012). These studies, while not limited to resilience alone, support the findings in both the academic and workplace settings that resilience and the higher level construct PsyCap, which includes resilience; have a positive impact on a student's academic success. Moreover, PsyCap and servant leadership, which is leadership that focuses on the needs of others, are positively correlated and both can be developed (Pfrombeck and Verdorfer, 2018).

Development of Resilience in Response to Covid-19, in Academics, and in the Workplace

Many scholars have suggested using the COVID-19 pandemic as a platform to develop resilience using multiple approaches. One approach recommended is tending to people's emotional needs (Barton et al., 2020). This involves active listening and demonstrating compassion that validates each individual's reaction to and feelings about the adversity. An additional approach is to support resilience through connectedness (Polizzi et al., 2020). Connectedness refers to social support

and the strength we receive from human contact, even by phone or otherwise. Social support is itself another approach to bolstering resilience (Killgore et al., 2020). Support from family, friends, and special contacts were associated with increased resilience highlighting the importance of maintaining those relationships and gleaning the emotional support they provide. Specific tools are suggested for the academic and workplace environments.

Research suggests some methods can be employed in the classroom to develop resilience inside the academic setting. One method is to build relationships. Students build academic resilience through the context of a positive academic community where connection is fostered through respect and empathy (Ahmed, 2018; Frisby et al., 2020; Holdsworth et al., 2017). Another method includes the creation of intentional coping intervention peer groups. These groups, that focus on reducing stress and addressing the emotional needs of the group members, proved an effective strategy to increase resilience (First et al., 2018). Finally, instilling a positive mindset, which views adversity as something which can be overcome and that allows them to recognize their own ability to grow and be developed, has been shown to increase resilience in college students (Yeager and Dweck, 2012).

Resilience development in the workplace has been broadly studied (Forbes & Fikretoglu, 2018; Robertson et al., 2015; Vanhove et al., 2016). Companies are encouraged to develop resilience by deliberately embedding resilience practices into the everyday work of their employees and creating a resilience promoting culture and environment (Kuntz et al., 2016). Such development would include the implementation of initiatives that focus on employee well-being, in particular their mental health and finding work life balance (Kuntz et al., 2017). One developmental tool in the workplace aimed at building resilience is called the work mindfulness program consisting of internet-based training focused on mindfulness therapy and cognitive strategies to manage stress and respond to mental health challenges (Joyce, 2018; Kuntz et al., 2017). Another way identified to develop resilience is building collegial professional relationships and networks including peers and mentors (Jackson et al., 2007; McDermid et al., 2016). This would include coaching relationships that have been proven effective at developing resilience (Grant et al., 2009).

Table 1
Research proven practices that aid in the development of resilience.

Developing Resilience in COVID-19	Developing Resilience in Academics	Developing Resilience in the Workplace	Developing Resilience Across Contexts
Emotional Support (Barton et al., 2020)	Attending to the emotional needs of students (Brewer et al., 2019)	Mindfulness and Well-being training (Kuntz et al., 2017; Joyce, 2018)	Emotional Support
Connectedness and Relationships (Polizzi et al., 2020)	Connectedness and Peer Relationships (Holdsworth et al. 2017; Frisby et al., 2020)	Relationships at Work (Jackson et al., 2007; McDermid et al., 2016)	Developing Connections and Building Relationships
Social Support (Killgore et al., 2020)	Peer and Teacher Support (First et al., 2018; Yeager and Dweck, 2012)	Coaching Support (Grant et al., 2009)	Leader and Peer Support

Servant Leadership

> The servant-leader is servant first. . . [it] begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. . . .The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and most difficult to administer, is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? (Greenleaf, 2011).

This quote by Robert Greenleaf taken from a reprint of an essay first published in 1970 ignited a broader conversation on the leadership construct we call servant leadership today. Servant leadership is unique amongst leadership constructs in that its primary focus is on the needs and development of their followers (van Dierendonck, 2011). Servant leaders place the needs of their followers above their own needs and attend to emotional needs beyond what would normally be expected in an employment context (Liden et al., 2008).

Many scholars have attempted to delineate specific dimensions to define servant leadership with more clarity. Spears outlined 10 characteristics crucial to the development of the servant leader (2010). He identified them to be: 1) Listening, 2) Empathy, 3) Healing, 4) Awareness, 5) Persuasion, 6) Conceptualization, 7) Foresight, 8) Stewardship, 9) Commitment to the Growth of People, and 10) Building Community. Liden et al., in the development of a measurement tool to examine servant leadership, delineated seven dimensions of a servant leader: (1)

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emotional healing, (2) creating value, (3) conceptual skills, (4) empowering, (5) helping subordinates grow and succeed, (6) putting subordinates first, and (7) behaving ethically (2008). These seven dimensions and accompanying measurement tools were validated through an additional study (Liden et al., 2015). Servant leaders, having invested the time and energy to appreciate their followers individually, not only know and understand the psychological needs of their followers, but also work to satisfy those needs. (van Dierendonck et al., 2014).

While there are definite distinctive differences in the definitions expressed to date, in general, servant leaders understand the importance of, and put priority on supporting their followers. This concept is captured in a recent effort to consolidate the disparate thinking around servant leadership, where key servant leadership researchers coalesced around the following definition:

> Servant leadership is an (1) other-oriented approach to leadership (2) manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests, (3) and outward reorienting of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community. (Eva et al., 2019, p. 114)

This definition's unique focus on service and meeting the needs of others is what creates the servant leader's ability to influence the resilience of their followers (Eliot, 2020).

Faculty as Servant Leaders

Many researchers argue that teachers function as leaders inside their classrooms (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2009; Pounder, 2008). In addition, researchers have found evidence that faculty characteristics and behaviors can impact student outcomes such as course grades and student perceptions of the course (Demir et al., 2018; Schriver et al., 2021). Building on these ideas, several scholars have examined how a servant leadership model can be implemented in the classroom, some even terming the application "servant teaching" (Behari Leak & Behari, 2020; Drury, 2005; Hays, 2008; Huber & Carter, 2014; Mattingly, 2014; McCann & Sparks, 2015; Nolan & Richards, 2018). Most of the research to date is based on the Spears 10 characteristic model.

Research supports the idea that servant leadership is good for students. Servant leadership was found positively related to student perception of quality instruction, especially the characteristic of emotional healing (McCann & Sparks, 2015). An important challenge for business schools to address is the finding that business faculty exhibited much lower rates of emotional healing characteristics than did non-business faculty (McCann & Sparks, 2015). In addition, servant leadership has had a significant positive impact on online learning in that the characteristics of listening, empathy, awareness and healing impacted the relationship building with and among students (Huber & Carter, 2014). Finally, a study of management education and servant leadership found key outcomes were produced in the classroom through the implementation of servant leadership. Students developed richer relationships with their faculty and stronger bonds with

their classmates while also exhibiting improved trust through greater expression and acceptance of emotions (Hays, 2008). Additional studies found "servant teaching was positively correlated with student indicators of learning and engagement," (Noland & Richards, 2015).

Based on these findings that servant leadership positively impacts students, many researchers are encouraging faculty to consider what this might look like in the classroom. After studying servant leadership inside the classroom, one researcher goes so far as to surmise that servant leadership is "the best leadership mindset in the classroom" (Drury, 2005, p. 9). Finally, in referring to how we as educators respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, Behari Leak and Behari recommend, "the elements of servant leadership should be embedded into the curricula of every subject, course, or program taught" (2020, p. 202).

Servant Teaching: Increasing Resilience in the Classroom

"[A] central task for . . . educators is to prepare students to respond resiliently when . . . challenges arise" (Yeager & Dwenck, 2012, p. 312). Combining below in Table 2 both the ways to develop resilience suggested in different contexts with the key characteristics of a servant leader/teacher, we see how exhibiting servant leadership characteristics in the classroom creates an environment for faculty to positively influence the resilience of their students. This conclusion complements the similar conclusion reached by Chan where, utilizing methodology similar to that presented herein; they concluded that the practices associated with servant leadership foster both a growth mindset and grit in learners (2016). Other research has connected the constructs of resilience and grit in the academic setting, while exploring developmental tools and impacts (Stoffel & Cain, 2018; Warren & Hale, 2020). The positive influence servant leadership characteristics may have on both constructs further expresses the impact of faculty servant leaders in the classroom

Table 2
Factors that develop resilience

Common Factors in Developing Resilience Across Contexts	Key Spears Servant Leadership Characteristics aligned with Developing Resilience (Spears, 2010)	Key Linden Servant Leadership Dimensions aligned with Developing Resilience (Linden et al., 2008)
Emotional Support	Listening Empathy Healing	Emotional Healing
Developing Connections and Building Relationships	Building Community Awareness	Helping Students Grow and Succeed
Leader and Peer Support	Commitment to the Growth of Students Stewardship	Putting Subordinates First

It is important to note that servant leaders can be developed (Pfrombeck & Verdorfer, 2018). Even if exhibiting servant leader behaviors is not natural for a faculty member, if they have a sincere desire, continually practice, and put forward intentional effort to utilize servant leader behaviors in the classroom, students viewing these efforts as sincere may develop trust with the faculty and ultimately be influenced in a positive way (Claar et al., 2014).

RECOMMENDATIONS

COVID-19 has caused great disruption in higher education and the lives of business students. A combination of factors including COVID-19 health concerns, the isolation created by the quarantine response, and the shift to online and virtual learning in higher education have placed even more stress and pressure on the already suffering mental health of higher education students. In response, students should draw on their resilience to face the adversity and respond positively to the stresses, both academic and otherwise, they are facing. Universities and faculty are uniquely positioned to assist in the development of and have a positive impact on the resilience of higher education students. In particular, by exhibiting the servant leadership characteristics of listening, empathy, emotional healing, building community, and helping students grow and succeed, faculty can encourage resilience development in their students.

Faculty can demonstrate these characteristics by implementing active listening techniques in the classroom, utilizing class time to "check-in" and discuss the stresses and pressures students are experiencing, visualizing with students pathways to success, creating learning communities or teams within a classroom to build relationships and provide peer support, and modelling empathy and caring in ways students can relate and replicate. These servant leadership dimensions, among others, are linked to proven resilience development interventions like attending to the emotional needs of their students, creating strong relationships in the classroom, and providing needed support. Specifically, business faculty should implement these actions to not only assist their students as they grapple with the current COVID-19 crisis, but to better prepare them to both positively respond to the transition from school to work and deal with work related adversity. Developed resilience can help students today, tomorrow and long into the future.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to force change and challenge previously accepted norms. It will take years for the ramifications of this global event to be fully realized and understood. Although the pandemic has caused a great deal of disturbance and anxiety, the current crisis also presents a unique opportunity for development and growth. Only when hardships are present, can qualities such as resilience be developed.

Resilience is increasingly identified as a quintessential skill to success in higher education and the workplace. Resiliency, as defined as positively adapting to significant adversity, is the very thing that allows employees and students alike

to deal with uncontrollable changes in our environment and the stress produced by those changes. Therefore, the discussion of how resiliency is developed and nurtured has emerged in both education and in business.

One plausible way to develop resiliency is through servant leadership. Servant leader characteristics provide many of the necessary components that help to develop resiliency including emotional support, relationship building, and leader support. The idea that servant leadership can be used to enhance resiliency is promising since existing methods for creating servant leaders already exist.

Thus, if higher education could combine what is known about building resiliency with what is known about adopting servant leadership, it could potentially help its students become more resilient. When faculty apply these tactics of servant leadership inside their classrooms, they help students develop resiliency. As we move forward in the midst of this pandemic and its fallout, faculty should prioritize implementing servant leadership in their classrooms to help students become more resilient.

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