

**Factors that Contribute to the Resiliency and Longevity of Higher Education
Faculty in High Stress Positions such as Academic Advisors and Mental Health
Practitioners**

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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the phenomenon of resilience as experienced by higher education faculty in high stress roles, specifically academic advisors who have large caseloads and mental health practitioners in collegiate counseling centers. Several factors are explored and their effects on resiliency and longevity, including environment, leadership, peer support, and personal motivation. Drawing on phenomenology, research literature, and the author's research among the target population, common themes and factors are identified that contribute and detract from employee's efficiency and well-being. This research is significant for not only staff in these roles to consider professionally in terms of their own well-being, but also for university leadership to be able to identify where, systemically, improvements can be made to ensure the best possible work environment for their employees in these high stress roles to prevent stress, burnout, and high turnover.

Keywords: resiliency, longevity, leadership, mental health, community

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge first and foremost my family, whose steadfast encouragement and support to take on such an endeavor lifted me up throughout the process. The joy of studying together and sharing the college experience concurrently is one that I'll always remember. Sacrifices for others are some of the biggest honors we can be given in life, and the culmination of this project and program is evidence of those sacrifices made by all of us at different times. Thank you for encouraging me to pursue my own dreams and passions.

Secondly, to all the academic advisors and mental health practitioners I know, including those who participated in this study, I believe you are the true heroes of higher education. Your steadfast empathy, care, and dedication to students and a role that requires so much sacrifice will forever be an inspiration to me. I hope this study honors that and inspires others to pursue this important work, thanks to what we learn about how to sustain you and help you thrive.

Dedication

To the practitioners of the future, may the rewards outweigh the sacrifices and may the community you build through your work help sustain and inspire you each day. May you always have hope and continue to pass it along to others you serve.

"Hope is fundamental to learning and to living. Hope recruits the imagination, giving us temporary respite from the difficult present while we consider how things might be made different. Research tells us that, particularly during periods of uncertainty, hope tilts us toward action and toward engaging with life—even as we remain uncertain about what will happen next" (Larsen, 2020).

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Higher Education is shaping our community leaders, teachers, doctors, economists, government leaders, parents, and families of the future. Students' mental health and thriving is critical to our collective future; while in college, these students are experiencing complex developmental processes (Wiley, 2024). They are pursuing not only their chosen professional academic goals often in rigorous programs, but also working through the process of self-authorship which includes issues such as exploring identity, values, finding community, building life skills outside of their home environment, and making decisions on their own often for the first time (Patton et al., 2016).

In addition to these complex developmental processes, many students face mental health challenges due to effects of COVID-19, racial injustice, war, the stress of being online and connected 24/7 to news media, social media, parental expectations, political tensions, and more (American Psychological Association, 2024). Collegiate counseling centers and academic advisors across the country are struggling to keep up with demand, due to both capacity and burnout of their faculty. The American Psychological Association (2024) agrees, noting that faculty who are charged with guiding these students through these developmental challenges and academic stressors are often stressed themselves (para. 2). This is especially true of academic advisors who carry unusually large caseloads and mental health practitioners such as counselors and psychologists who serve students dealing with crises on a regular basis. High turnover among college counseling centers is cited most often due to higher salaries elsewhere and environmental stressors (Gorman & Schofield, 2023). High turnover places pressure on

remaining staff, increasing their caseloads and reducing overall capacity, further exacerbating the stressful workplace environment for those who remain (Gorman & Schofield, 2023). The high stress and critical nature of their jobs, helping students navigate complex mental health challenges and overcoming academic hurdles to get to graduation adds to this pressure, often leading to burnout and high turnover.

At the same time, many of these employees in high-stress positions possess a resiliency, a capacity beyond what many would consider to be reasonable in their circumstances and workloads, that keeps them motivated and engaged in this hard work (Alonazi & Alshowka ,2023). In a study examining teachers in the UK, it was shown that teachers' capacities to be resilient were perceived to be influenced by a range of mediating factors embedded in the personal, relational, and organizational conditions in their workplaces (Gu & Day, 2013). In addition, political, economic, social, technological, ecological/environment, and legal factors are critical components that comprise and challenge workplace well-being (Descza et al., 2019). Unger and Theron (2020) assert that resilience is best understood as the process of multiple biological, psychological, social, and ecological systems interacting in ways to increase an individual's well-being.

For the scope of this study, environmental and social factors were examined with the addition of leadership. Effective leadership is essential to workplace thriving, as noted by Clifton & Harter (2021): “Designing an engaging workplace that is the foundation for thriving well-being and overall mental health is led by the manager” (p. 112). Northouse (2022) suggests that leadership carries a moral and ethical responsibility to influence others to make changes to achieve a common good. Leadership and departmental

structures can make a significant impact in an employee's experience of their workplace. Therefore it is important to identify what type of leadership employees in high stress positions prefer and find the most influential on their well-being.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to explore the factors that contribute to the resiliency and longevity of higher education faculty in high stress positions, such as academic advisors with large caseloads and mental health practitioners. Factors relating to the physical environment, leadership structure, peer support, and personal motivation will be examined through a series of questions. Discovering protective factors that can address and prevent this type of stress is a secondary aim of this study.

Research Questions

1. How does the environment contribute to the resiliency, longevity, and effectiveness of higher education faculty in high stress positions?
2. How do leadership structures contribute to the resiliency, longevity, and effectiveness of higher education faculty in high stress positions?
3. How do community factors and personal motivations contribute to the resiliency, longevity, and effectiveness of higher education faculty in high stress positions?
4. How do higher education faculty in high stress positions define resilience?

Research Design: Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a research design approach that attempts to define a phenomenon, or why people experience something in some way. There is an "essence of the experience" (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 104) that the researcher is attempting to uncover. I chose this methodology because I have encountered many academic advisors,

mental health practitioners, and other staff in high-stress roles at the university who share the unrelenting stress of their work, and yet also possess a high amount of resilience and motivation to continue to do so even in the face of burnout and exhaustion. These individuals share the experience of serving students who are in distress, and therefore, may experience distress themselves. Often they do not, however, and exhibit a resiliency and longevity that is remarkable (Soria et al., 2024). I believe a phenomenological study can uncover some of the factors that contribute to this, and hopefully be used to prepare others entering these fields for what stressors may come and how they can fortify themselves in advance.

Phenomenology uses interviews, focus groups, surveys, and even artistic expression to collect data from participants (Creswell & Poth, 2017), and this appeals to me because of the opportunity for people to tell their stories in multi-faceted ways, to put together a picture of how their experiences have shaped them. This method is common in education and in health sciences (Creswell & Poth, 2017) and gives voice to people's lived experiences. Through their shared experiences, I was able to see what they have in common. Being able to describe a shared experience or phenomenon of a group of people who have something in common is an advantage of phenomenological research. The data can be used to create a composite description that can benefit others who share the trait or experience that drew the group together in the study in the first place. This study aims to be able to create a composite description of common stressors and what to expect when considering becoming a mental health practitioner or academic advisor in the campus environment. Creswell and Poth (2017) state that knowing common experiences can be valuable "for groups such as therapists, teachers, health personnel, and policy makers" (p.

80), which closely aligns with the high stress groups I have identified in higher education. In addition, phenomenology offers an advantage of providing “deep learning, leading to a transformation of consciousness, heightened perceptiveness, and increased thoughtfulness” (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 82). These outcomes are also highly desired reasons to use this research approach.

Theoretical Framework

To conduct this research, I approached it from both social constructivist theory and a transformative framework. Social constructivism allows one to make meaning of individuals’ lives and the worlds in which they work (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Examining the environments of these high-stress roles in higher education gave me a view into the participants' individual situations and how they navigate their daily roles and stressors. The goal was to discover how they develop meaning through their situations, a “meaning typically forged in discussion or interactions with other persons” (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 24). Meaning is often a protective factor in individuals in high stress roles, so social constructivism provides a framework for discovering this.

The transformative theory posits that “the purpose of knowledge construction is to aid people to improve society” (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 25). The purpose of this study is to discover the factors that increase resiliency and longevity of these critical roles so that better care can be taken both of our students and employees, preventing burnout and turnover. Of particular interest in transformative theory is how issues facing marginalized groups can be addressed in order to advance equity and bring transformation to these often underserved communities. I was curious to see if/how any issues relating to

marginalized identities of any research participants rose up through the data, and possibly contribute to the resiliency and longevity of employees in high stress positions.

Reflexivity Statement

I come to the research and inquiry of what creates well-being among faculty and staff in high stress roles at universities with personal experience of such, including years of working in the inner city and being “on call” for a community of people in challenging socioeconomic situations. Moving later into higher education, I spent many years in a student programming role alongside some academic advisors. After that, I pursued a new role in student health and well-being that seemed to be the opportunity of a lifetime. This role quickly became one where the demands placed on my time and body were extreme. I lasted only six months in this role due to the unrealistic expectations and extreme stress I endured. When my children, all four of them separately, approached me with their concerns about the effects of this role, I knew it was not worth hanging on to despite my fear of failure after being in the position for such a short time. I approach this research firsthand with knowledge of the consequences and risks associated with high stress positions.

I believe the demographic of the college student population is a critical one to ensure the health and well-being of, in the area of mental health in particular, given the proven mental health challenges and collective trauma many of them have endured, as mentioned before. Practitioners, such as academic advisors and mental health professionals, work daily with the stress of supporting these students through difficult challenges. My passion for health and well-being has extended towards employees and

professionals, to ensure that they are supported and can thrive in these high stress roles, as they support students in this critical time of their lives and development.

Currently, I have the privilege of supporting mental health practitioners in higher education, and I find their energy, passion, empathy, and care to be extraordinary. I also find their burdens to be heavy, thereby making their support systems and environments critical to their health and well-being. Qualitative research, from a social constructivist, transformative, and even pragmatic viewpoint has helped me discover how these high stress positions endure and what further can be done to support them. My professional vision for the last ten years has been to create spaces where people can feel supported, grow, and thrive. My hope is that this research will contribute to this vision and help a segment of higher education professionals who do difficult and impactful work every day.

Significance of the Study

This study reflects my interest in learning how faculty who work with students, especially those who are in crisis or need substantive support during their college experience, are able to stay committed and passionate while doing this hard work. I am interested in this population because they are often overworked, underfunded or supported, and stressed. I believe that if we can identify these conditions and factors, we can work to prepare and train future employees in higher education in high stress roles such as these. This information can be used to prevent burnout, increase retention in these critical roles, and contribute to both student and employee well-being and thriving.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

According to the American Psychological Association (2018), resiliency is “the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands” (para.1). Relevant literature was examined to see what factors have been identified that contribute to the resiliency and longevity of academic advisors and mental health practitioners in higher education and two similar roles, teachers and nurses.

The Problem: Burnout and High Stress

Mental health practitioners and academic advisors are considered “high stress” positions due to several factors: they often carry large caseloads of students that present with varying levels of challenges, they have a limited timeframe to work with them, are sometimes called upon to work after hours and respond to crisis (Wilhelm, 2024), and must possess a vast knowledge of campus resources to connect students to when in need (Malchow, 2021). There is a caring piece described by authors McAllister and McKinnon (2009) that clarifies this stress is due to the high degree of self-giving. They say, “Whilst the self can certainly grow and flourish in this altruistic experience, it can also suffer” (McAllister & McKinnon, 2009, p.371). Retention of these important roles is a concern when these high stress positions lead to burnout, culminating from the negative consequences of stress and job dissatisfaction (Wilhelm, 2024). Without intervention, it will hamper recruitment efforts for these critical roles (Hegney et al., 2006). Glass (2009) agrees that the factors contributing to these high stress positions include challenging workplace environment, psychological emptiness, and diminished inner balance.

The Solution: Resiliency

In looking at potential protective factors and workplace environments that can prevent burnout and high turnover among mental health professionals and academic advisors, authors and researchers overwhelmingly agree that possessing and growing personal resiliency is key. Glass (2009) found that hope and optimism were considered main components of resilience; and as a “trio,” they were pervasive and could result in a powerful self-healing. In a study of teachers in England, researchers found that teachers' capacities to be resilient were perceived to be influenced by a range of mediating factors embedded in the personal, relational, and organizational conditions in their workplaces (Gu & Day, 2013). It is also reported that the key rewards for academic advisors have been found to be “work environment and culture (autonomy, variety and flexibility of the work, and collegiality and relationships with peers), and student interaction” (Roche, 2019, p. 17). Having a supportive community internally and external from the workplace was shown to be a key factor in resilience (Glass, 2009). It is also interesting to note that intrinsic motivation and sense of “calling” in their profession was a key factor found in resilient staff, specifically having strong educational purposes and moral values (Gu & Day, 2013). Specific to nurses in mental health facilities, Alonazi et al (2023) found that compassion satisfaction, a feeling of achievement resulting from supporting and caring for others, was a significant contributing factor of resiliency in their roles.

Recommendations: Intrinsic Motivation, Community, Training, and Leadership

Authors Gu & Day (2013) and Glass (2009) agree that building resiliency is key to retention, growth, and well-being of professionals in high stress positions. Methods of building this resiliency differ and include finding intrinsic motivation, building

community, increasing training, and having a structure of leadership that is invested in employee well-being. Glass (2009) encourages practitioners to actively engage in reframing views of self in the workplace by drawing upon their strengths of psychological flexibility, adaptability, and emotional intelligence, as well as grounding positive connections with friends and the environment. Gu and Day (2013) agree and suggest that fostering cooperative and supportive relationships (i.e., learning and developing together) is a necessary part of a healthy work environment contributing to resiliency.

This is true also of leadership structures, in that supportive leadership can provide professional and personal support to bolster staff through challenging times (Gu & Day, 2013). Clifton and Harter (2021) say that “managers are the single most important factor in the engagement and performance of your workforce” (p. 109). Leadership styles vary and can be used to bring out the best in employees and their workplace community. A transformational leader is concerned with “emotions, values, ethics, standards, and long-term goals” (Northouse, 2022, p. 185) of their followers and teams, resulting in an “exceptional form of influence that moves followers to accomplish more than what is usually expected of them” (Northouse, 2022, p. 185). Followers are treated as individuals, and valued for their full humanity (Northouse, 2022) rather than just what they bring to work. Transformational leadership embraces the process as an opportunity to grow as a person, impacts the common good whether it is a community or a project, and brings value to the work being done rather than its accomplishment alone (in contrast to transactional leadership). Servant leadership presents quite a different approach whereby it demonstrates leaders who are “attentive to the concerns of their followers,

empathize with them, and nurture them...they put followers first, empower them, and help them develop their full personal capacities” (Northouse, 2022, p. 253). The leader puts aside their own goals and ambitions in order to develop the follower into a better person and team member, achieving their goals, and meeting their needs. The emphasis is on the follower, not the leader, hopefully leading to follower empowerment (Northouse, 2022). Transformational leadership will help inspire others to overcome their obstacles to define their own strengths and be empowered. Servant leadership, by putting the followers' needs above the leader's, will help develop them into a fully engaged and fulfilled team member with their own gifts and strengths to contribute (Northouse, 2022). The evidence of the effect of leadership on employee well-being led me to explore how it may build resiliency and foster well-being among these high stress roles.

Unger and Theron (2020) assert that readily available resources also bolster resiliency, saying that “individuals with adequate resources show more resilience than rugged individuals do” (p. 441). Intellectual, emotional, and spiritual reflections and then commitments can provide the intrinsic motivation and emotional commitment required of professionals in high stress positions to provide the best service for their students, and preserve their own well-being (Gu & Day, 2013). Several authors agree that resilience theory should be part of the educational content of workplace training programs, and that efforts should be made to help professionals in high stress roles be more aware of the likely experiences they will face on entry into the profession (Gu & Day, 2013; McAllister & McKinnon, 2009). Resilience theory is the study of the “things that make up this phenomenon including its definition, what ‘adversity’ and ‘outcomes’ actually mean, and the scope and nature of resilience processes” (van Breda, 2018, p.1).

Modifications in workplace culture should also be considered (McAlister & McKinnon, 2009).

Another main factor that influences workplace well-being is the environment (Descza et al., 2019). A person's physical environment around them contributes a great deal to the success and well-being of those who interact with the space, in this case being both students and faculty in higher education. Unger and Theron (2020) say that "resilience depends just as much on the culturally relevant resources available to stressed individuals in their social, built, and natural environments as it does on individual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors" (p.441). This shows an additional focus on systems and environments, which begs further study in the context of the university as it provides a unique framework or ecosystem in which to perform these roles. Not only do spaces need to contain the necessary elements to do our work efficiently, but they also affect how we feel when we are in the space. They affect how people interact, communicate, and can foster environments that promote conversation, inspiration, comfort, and healing. This evidence led me to research the effect of environmental structures on resiliency and longevity of higher education professionals who serve in high stress roles in order to prevent burnout and turnover as they serve this important demographic of students. The research questions for this study that focus on the built environment attempt to uncover some of these 'culturally relevant resources.'

Finally, the supporting workplace community was examined as a factor that influences workplace well-being. The people with whom one works on a regular basis have a significant impact on their workplace well-being, much more than geography, history, great leadership, quality programming, and many other factors that we

traditionally use to nurture success (Block, 2018). “Community well-being simply has to do with the quality of relationships, the cohesion among its citizens” (Block, 2018, p. 17-18). This cohesion can be described by the concept of “social capital,” and is demonstrated when coworkers connect in a meaningful and reciprocal way, building trust and value for their office. The literature examined across these professions provided an informative backdrop to the research performed in this study, as outlined below.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter will outline the methods applied throughout this study to achieve the data from participating academic advisors and mental health practitioners. Qualitative research was conducted through a brief web-based survey and subsequent interviews.

The target population included academic advisors who carry high caseloads (or feel as though they carry high caseloads due to factors in addition to numbers of students) and mental health practitioners, due to the nature of their work with students in distress. For the purpose of this study, academic advisors were defined as those who work with undergraduate students to choose a major, build their courseload, navigate university systems and resources, and successfully graduate. A mental health practitioner is defined as a professional working in a collegiate counseling center who does therapy with students, and may be a psychologist, a licensed professional counselor, or a licensed clinical social worker. Both populations were targeted because of their front-line work with students, often being the first ones to address students in crisis, who have high needs, or are facing challenges to their academic success and need external support.

The web-based survey was distributed to academic advisors through an internal listserv at Virginia Tech and reached approximately 1,000 people. The email invitation (Appendix A) was distributed to mental health practitioners via several nationwide collegiate counseling center listservs including the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors, training directors at collegiate counseling centers, and clinical directors at collegiate counseling centers. An estimated 800 mental health practitioners were reached through these listservs. The intent of the web-based survey was to gauge interest and identify those available for potential interviews. Through the

survey, if participants indicated that they had a high caseload and felt their job was high stress, then an in-depth interview with those participants was requested and subsequently scheduled if schedules aligned.

Data Collection

The first point of data collection was the web-based survey (Appendix B), which potential subjects were invited to participate in via an email from the researcher (Appendix A). The web-based survey collected information such as role, how many years they have been serving in the role, if they consider their role to be high stress or not, and whether they were interested in participating in an interview aimed at discovering factors that influence resiliency and longevity among faculty in high stress positions in higher education. Participants were invited to schedule an interview if they answered the question, “do you consider your job to be high stress?” in a positive manner, and if they met the other criteria (i.e., being an academic advisor or a mental health practitioner). An information sheet (Appendix C) was then given to the participant, and an interview was scheduled.

Qualitative data was collected by means of semi-structured, open-ended interviews, each lasting 30–45 minutes. Nine academic advisors were interviewed, and nine mental health practitioners were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix D). The interview began with a few demographic questions to obtain information about their role at the university, then three sections pertaining to environment, leadership structure, and community support followed. If time allowed, a final section inquiring about resiliency and personal motivation concluded the interviews.

Data Analysis

Interviews were mechanically transcribed via the Otter.ai tool within Zoom. The researcher reviewed the transcripts for accuracy and made corrections as needed. The transcriptions were then coded in ATLAS.ti to discover common themes, relevant quotes, and surprising or unexpected outcomes.

Initial questions asked the participant's role at the university, and the following includes a summary of those responses. Of 18 participants, nine were academic advisors and nine were mental health practitioners. The academic advisors were all employed at Virginia Tech, recruited through the Virginia Tech advising network listserv; and the mental health practitioners were employed at colleges and universities across the country, recruited through the various national college counseling center listservs mentioned previously. This delineation was made due to the researcher's existing connections and efforts to avoid a conflict of interest due to their current work environment. Of the nine mental health practitioners, seven also carried a significant administrative leadership role of director or assistant director, which consequently reduced their caseload and yet increased their responsibilities over their respective centers.

Participants reported being in their roles anywhere from two to 30 years, with an average of 7.8 years and a median of 5.5 years. Table 1 summarizes each group further.

Table 1

Summary of Range, Median, and Average Years in Role for Participant Groups

	Range	Median	Average
Academic Advisors	2 to 30 years	3 years	9 years
Mental Health Practitioners	3 to 16 years	6 years	6.7 years

Advisors interviewed were either in their role for three or less years, or 10 or more years, while mental health practitioners were in their roles between three and seven years, except for two who were 10+ years in their role. When asked how many students were on their caseload, responses ranged from five students to 500, with the higher numbers going to the advisors as they are expected to guide 200+ students, at least, each semester to graduation. Mental health practitioners' caseloads are smaller due to the nature of the work (longer sessions, required notes and diagnoses for each student, etc.) so their numbers ranged from five to 40, sometimes more when group therapy was included. All participants indicated that their caseload felt high due to factors such as increased demand and rising acuity.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that contribute to the resiliency and longevity of higher education faculty in high stress positions, such as academic advisors and mental health practitioners, and each interview yielded diverse and valuable data. After ascertaining the role, years of service, and caseloads of participants, three main factors were investigated as ones that influence the longevity and resiliency of these employees: environment, leadership, and community support. If time allowed, participants were then asked some general questions about resiliency and longevity, including advice they would share with others in order to last and be effective in a role like theirs. This chapter will include a discussion of the themes that emerged from each of these categories.

Of notable interest is that despite being two different professions and fields of expertise, both academic advisors and mental health practitioners expressed similar sentiments regarding the challenges they face to meet student needs, coupled with administrative demands of the role, and rising acuity of student challenges. In addition, a subset of mental health practitioners emerged in the data, as most practitioners interviewed also held a high level administrative/director role in addition to their practice of therapy. This subset raised some interesting discoveries regarding the layers of roles that faculty in higher education often carry out, and the challenges associated with those numerous and sometimes competing responsibilities. This will be discussed briefly in Chapter 5. Most participants stated they enjoyed answering the questions, expressed gratitude for the research, and being able to participate in a study that would improve experiences and well-being for faculty in roles like theirs.

Examining Environment

The findings begin with a focus on the research question, ‘How does the environment contribute to the resiliency, longevity, and effectiveness of higher education faculty in high stress positions?’ To gather this information, participants were asked to describe their physical environment, what factors contribute or detract from their effectiveness, if they felt they had what they needed to perform their role adequately, and to describe their ideal work environment. From these questions, three main elements emerged: natural light, accessibility, and personalization.

First, both advisors and mental health practitioners alike mentioned the importance of having natural light. Windows were a top priority, and if not available, the ability to use lamps and other soft lighting was an important tool. This was expressed by eight out of nine advisors, and eight out of nine mental health practitioners. The desire for a window, natural light, or soft lighting was so important that one participant shared, “For those clinicians in our office who don't have windows, which is a significant number of them, I would not be able to stay in that job if that were the case for me.”

Second, they mentioned the accessibility of the space. This included having collaborative spaces to work together with coworkers. This may mean an actual physical space where they can convene to support each other's work, or it may mean a digital space like a group chat to be able to access one another when not located in the same physical location. Both academic advisors and mental health practitioners alike wanted the ability to consult with one another so as not to be left isolated. One advisor shared: “We have a good team... we are really good at being listening ears, but also sharing resources that have made things easier. So we do a lot of good things with that.”

Accessibility also included accessibility to students and how important it is to them to be easily reached by students whether it be embedded in the academic departments they serve, or in a centralized or highly traversed section of campus. One counselor said:

“I do think students feel less stigmatized with where we're at, because the other 3 floors of the building are academic space, so that they could be coming in for class or going to see someone that they're in the program for so it's more discreet that way. The location is wonderful.”

The concept of accessibility emerged as a negative factor when speaking in terms of productivity. Four of the nine advisors mentioned that frequent interruptions from coworkers (and sometimes students) was a frustration they dealt with daily. One advisor said, “The interruptions are, you know, like probably my greatest critique.” Another said, “I could be more efficient if I was doing my work instead of chit chatting.” Two of the mental health practitioners mentioned this same occurrence, due to both spatial proximity and having dual roles (administrative and clinical) that compete for their attention. One participant described the issue in relation to her proximity to the kitchen: “It's a double-edged sword, right like, because I'm so accessible -which I like to be- yet I get interrupted a lot, and so I don't have much of a workflow.” As mentioned before, a subset of mental health practitioners emerged as being those who, in addition to doing therapy with students, carry a highly demanding administrative role for example as director or assistant director. One of them shared: “Things get interrupted all the time being a director, and if something pops off over here, they're always calling on me to come deal with that. And it's just a hassle.”

Finally, many mentioned the need to be able to personalize their space, to make it both a welcoming environment for students and, perhaps more importantly to this research, to make it a place where they themselves can feel comfortable and able to express themselves. This contributes greatly to their longevity in the role, as one therapist said:

“The ability to put things in there that I love, and to have art that makes me happy, to make a space my own and feel like home has made a massive difference in me being able to stay in this role. So I have decided what goes where, what it looks like, and it feels like it's a representation of me.”

Examining Leadership

Leadership is a critical element of workplace well-being and related directly to the next research question, ‘How do leadership structures contribute to the resiliency, longevity, and effectiveness of higher education faculty in high stress positions?’ Participants had a lot to say about what kind of leadership style helps and hinders them in being effective in the workplace. Three main questions were asked of participants in this section. First, they were asked to describe their most immediate supervisor’s leadership style. Second, they were asked if their supervisor’s leadership style helped or hindered them in carrying out their role. Finally, participants were asked if they felt supported by their leadership, and to give an example. Several themes emerged from this section of the interviews. All 18 participants expressed the need for a supportive supervisor to be successful in their role.

While participants overwhelmingly stated they want a supportive supervisor, they also expressed that they do not want to be micromanaged. They want to be trusted in their

practice and field. When participants were micromanaged, they felt that they were not trusted by their supervisor. Conversely, when their supervisors were more “hands off,” they felt trusted to do their jobs and in their expertise. Stated simply, one counselor described their supervisor by saying: “She trusts us to do what we need to do.”

Participants wanted that support to be expressed through flexibility in the workplace, having a listening ear/open door policy, and being a strong advocate for them to others. One participant said, “If my supervisor was more direct and practiced advocating, I feel like I would feel more protected in my role and vocalize what I needed.” Another participant shared:

“My previous supervisor was exceptionally supportive. She went to bat multiple times to educate people. She made sure to get me in environments and rooms with people so I could help educate them; and once they heard and were educated and received that information, that [criticism] all went away.”

In addition, while participants do not want to be micromanaged, seven out of the 18 expressed desire for more direct feedback and guidance from their supervisor. Most of these participants were advisors, and more often than not they expressed having supervisors who were more distant and unavailable. Whether they were new in the role, wanted clarity on decisions needing to be made, or desired feedback to know they were performing their role adequately, this was an often-requested practice of their leader. One advisor shared, “I feel like the only time he talks to me is when something has to be done; like we don't have any sort of personal relationship to balance the professional aspects.” Mental health practitioners also expressed the desire for feedback, but not as often, and

when they did mention it, it was in the context of wanting feedback and consultation on difficult and stressful cases rather than work performance.

Another large component that participants mentioned was the necessity of good communication. Among the data, two extremes exist: participants expressed either that their supervisor was very open and a good listener, or difficult to talk to and ineffective at communication. When there was good communication, participants felt supported, and when there was not, participants felt unsupported, overlooked, and frustrated. One participant shared this frustration in the analogy of a goalpost shift: “Communication is often poor or lacking. Directions are not always clear when there is something that she wants done, and what she wants is something that's like the goalpost shift. So there's not a whole lot of consistency.” When asked what the ideal leadership structure for success in their role, one participant responded by saying: “Someone who is going to communicate on all levels and make you feel heard, even if they can't implement everything or make everyone 100% happy. Just that they are listening to you, and that they care about your opinions.”

Being supported by their supervisor also was expressed in the desire for flexibility in the workplace. Participants wanted to be able to express their needs to their supervisor and then make changes as needed. This was stated in areas such as professional development, having a hybrid work environment, or needing more work life balance. This desire was acutely felt by one mental health practitioner, which reflects the reality of many college counseling centers:

“I think a lot of people work in a university for flexibility, you know, like we're salaried. Technically, everyone else is able to come and go when they're done

with their work. We can't because we're a counseling center. So, we function as though we're hourly, even though we are salaried. And we have to be here at certain times. And I think it's hard to look and see that everyone else just leaves when they feel like it, and we have to be here.”

This contributes greatly to stress in the mental health field in particular.

Finally, 10 of 18 participants noted the need to feel valued by their supervisor in their role, and that had a direct impact on their resiliency and being able to last in the role even through stress and difficulty. One advisor shared, “So long as I feel valued and supported, you're going to get the very best of me.” The supportive, relational aspect of leadership including open communication, trust, offering feedback, and feeling valued, was highly desired for participants in these roles, as expressed by all 18 participants in the study.

Examining Workplace Community and Personal Motivation

This third section addresses the third research question, ‘How do community factors and personal motivations contribute to the resiliency, longevity, and effectiveness of higher education faculty in high stress positions?’ The desire for quality relationships and the presence of social cohesion was evident in the data from both advisors and mental health practitioners. Reporting the necessity of having meaningful relationships not only increased participants' enjoyment of the role, but also served as a protective factor when facing challenges such as large caseloads and high stress.

Examining personal motivations also provided insight into how staff in these roles are able to last over time and be successful. In this final section of the interview, the final research question, ‘How does personal motivation contribute to resiliency, longevity, and

effectiveness in higher education faculty in high stress positions?’ was addressed.

Participants were asked what they find rewarding and draining about their work, what they do to keep going when they are drained, if they feel supported by their peers, what led them to pursue this role, and what would be a reason that they would leave their role. These questions provided insight into each participant's personal values and reward systems, in addition to discovering how they support one another through stress and challenges. Both aspects are valuable factors of resiliency and cannot be understated in their importance.

Having a supportive network of coworkers was very valuable to participants, and one of the most often expressed factors that contributed to their workplace resiliency and longevity. This is where some of the data diverged, however. While both academic advisors and mental health practitioners want to have supportive coworkers, two mental health practitioners noted that attending to co-workers’ needs was often a workplace stressor, due to the nature of their work with students. One therapist said:

“It's honestly draining when I have to tend to my coworkers and colleagues' emotions, because I do that for my clients. I need my colleagues to be able to manage their emotions and regulate their needs, because I can't be their therapist, too.”

However, most participants expressed that having coworkers to vent and process things with was extremely important to their resiliency. The following statement is from an academic advisor but represents a common sentiment for many: “I lean a lot on my colleagues. We have good support, motivate each other, [and provide a] listening ear when needed.”

Discovering personal motivations varied across all 18 participants; however, the majority shared that the “students are the reward.” They drew great satisfaction and strength from getting to work with college students due to the multiple and varied developmental processes they are experiencing at this time in their lives. One counselor shared a common sentiment, “We have a really cool job; we get to help people be who they're going to be.” Another stated: “I really, really love working with college students. It's such a fun age to get to step in and like help accompany them as they're figuring things out. That's such a like critical, inherently change-inducing time of life.”

Four out of nine advisors, and all nine mental health practitioners stated that the “chance to make a difference” in someone’s life was a significant reward of their work. One counselor said:

“We are literally getting to help save lives, you know; like there's always students who say, ‘if it weren't for you I would have killed myself.’ And that's amazing to think that you can have that kind of impact.”

An advisor shared:

“My philosophy in working in higher ed is really that this is when change in our society can spark, and I think this is the time to get a younger generation invested in bettering our society; and so being able to play a part in that on the front lines, I think, is a really critical and fulfilling job.”

Seeing students make choices and changes that resulted in life changes and goals reached was a strong motivator and reward in their work.

Defining Resilience

In the final section of the interview, participants were asked their general thoughts about resiliency. This section addressed the research question, ‘How do higher education faculty in high stress positions define resilience?’ When asked if their role required resilience, 11 participants said yes and four participants responded with a sliding scale answer (i.e., sometimes or it depends).

Participants then offered their own definitions of resiliency, which conveyed some nuance to the generally accepted American Psychological Association (2018) definition. Several participants reflected on the theme of hope defining resilience, saying things such as “Like a flower like growing from concrete... no matter the conditions finding a way to create what you need” (mental health practitioner) and “Falling down seven times and getting up eight” (academic advisor). One participant reflected the concept of protection, saying resilience is like “a little shield over chaos” (academic advisor). Another shared theme was that of proactivity and advocating for what you need, as reflected in these two quotes from mental health practitioners: “Leave conditions that are not fruitful to the soil. You need to flourish. Resiliency is like listening to yourself and what your brain needs, what you need to thrive. And then both seeking out, creating and pushing for, advocating for, that environment... for you.” “Everyone needs resiliency, and we need to start as a society at a much younger age, developing resiliency in our children. So by the time they get to be an adult, they already have it built in versus trying to learn it on the back end. So it's being proactive versus reactive. And our society is hugely reactive. And it does not work well.” Being intentional about responding with

positivity, persistent through challenges, and staying flexible were also themes defining resiliency that were shared by participants.

Chapter 5: Recommendations & Conclusion

Conducting this research yielded both some predictable outcomes, and also some surprising ones. While I would expect most people would want a supportive supervisor and a space with natural light, for example, I was happy to see some unexpected and fresh data emerge around creativity, proactivity, and personal freedoms. Drawing from some major themes that emerged from these 18 interviews, the following includes recommendations in the areas of environment, leadership, community support, and general workplace well-being, which includes personal motivations. Based on the interview findings, it may be beneficial for university administration to consider the following recommendations. In addition, participants were asked what advice they had for someone considering a role like theirs, in order to last over time and be successful. Themes are shared below, and the full text of responses is included in Appendix D.

Environment

With the importance of environment for the well-being of employees (Dezca, 2019) the physical work environment can be improved if university administrators consider prioritizing investing in spaces that promote well-being. The data shows that mental health practitioners and advisors alike strongly desire natural light through a window in their offices. This allows them and the students they serve to see beyond what is happening in the room, enlarges their perspective, and creates a soothing environment. When a window is not available, administrators might encourage the use of soft lighting, invest in dimmer switches, and allow staff to grow plants so as to bring the element of nature inside the space (Block, 2018).

The administrators might also provide shared, collaborative spaces where staff can gather to support one another in their work, and also to get a break from the often isolating work of meeting with students one on one for the larger part of a day. Providing collaborative spaces can help create networks of support and allow for meaningful connection to happen more easily (Block, 2018). To address one of the negative aspects of a collaborative environment, I recommend administrators have open discussions and create a plan about when interrupting someone's workflow is appropriate and when it is not, so as to protect people's ability to complete their work without frequent interruptions.

I also recommend administrators ask and encourage staff to give input and design their own spaces to maximize client impact, setting up and decorating their spaces in ways that feel comfortable to them and reflect who they are as a person. This communicates trust and gives them freedom to do their work in a way that feels most authentic to them (Northouse, 2022).

Leadership

In terms of leadership, it was strongly expressed that a supportive supervisor is highly desired. Leaders of staff in these high stress roles could adopt relational styles of leadership which support and preserve employee well-being (Northouse, 2022). These styles include transformational and servant leadership. These leadership styles lend themselves to having more authentic workplace conversations, understanding people's situations and motivations, and promoting trust. Leaders can also express support by incorporating flexibility in the workplace wherever possible and taking great care not to micromanage their team members, as expressed by both academic advisors and mental

health practitioners (Northouse, 2022). Based on the participants' desire for feedback, leaders should consider giving feedback on a regular basis and use strengths-based or relational leadership to understand where their staff need the most input versus where they just need encouragement to continue what they are already doing successfully (Clifton & Harter, 2021). Leaders should trust their staff especially in areas of expertise, and advocate for them to university administration when needed. Leaders should take great care to communicate clearly and often with their teams, maintain an open-door policy, and be open to suggestions from their team.

While a supportive, relational style of leadership is preferred for these types of high stress roles, it is also worth noting that leaders should serve as advocates for their staff when necessary and be willing to go before others too advocate for their needs. This leadership practice is good for employee well-being because it facilitates a genuine connection for employees to feel seen and heard (Northouse, 2022).

In contrast to that one-on-one relationship, it is also important for leaders to look broadly at university systems, organizations, and structures to be sure they are set up in a way that supports these staff in high stress roles so they can thrive (Gorman, 2023). Thinking systemically, a leader can ask, 'what is the university doing to support our employees in high stress roles?'

As mentioned previously, the data revealed a subset of participants: those who have dual or multiple roles to balance. This emerged both with academic advisors and mental health practitioners, but more so with mental health practitioners. Eight out of nine of these professionals held both clinical roles and significant administrative roles. Of note within this subset was the significant expectation that participants felt, specifically,

the pressure to sacrifice more and more. Leaders and supervisors should recognize the tendency to expect an uneven level of sacrifice from these types of helping professions. While serving in multiple roles may be a good way to allow for personalization of roles and utilization of passions (which is unique to working in higher education as opposed to private practice), the challenge can sometimes be too taxing for one person to juggle. One participant said, “So much shifting between different tasks is really draining... or when something unexpected happens and the whole rest of my day is impacted... we aren’t allotted enough time for administrative tasks.” Supervisors should allow for personalizing roles and having multiple responsibilities, but to be cautious that it does not result in overworking their staff. This can result in asking to sacrifice too much from an already helping profession, and great care should be taken to avoid this. Kelli Wolfe, deputy academic registrar at the University of Roehampton, warns, “Among colleagues, one often hears the sector relies on ‘adrenaline and goodwill’ to stay afloat. This is not a sustainable business model” (Jack, 2024, para.7).

Finally, in recognizing the significant stress and challenges that these roles experience throughout the year, leaders should get creative about finding ways to build in breaks and flexibility during the less stressful times, so as to build up resiliency and be proactive in preparing for the ups and downs of a typical year in higher education. Another way that leaders can get creative and help their teams see the impact of their work is by exploring ways to provide closure, such as attending students’ graduation ceremonies and celebrating student success, achievements, and growth. This can build up their staff so they can be prepared, resilient, and hopeful when the difficulties come. One

advisor shared, “I love attending commencement ceremonies when I really see the fruition of my student's hard work, but also my hard work, too.”

Workplace Community and Personal Motivations

When it comes to the workplace community and personal motivations, fostering a supportive environment among coworkers is critical to employee longevity and resilience. Building community in the workplace increases retention, improves work product, and bolsters quality of life (Alonazi, et al., 2023). Therefore, employees should be encouraged to interact and rely on one another, and the use of teams and working groups can be useful in achieving this as well as build social capital (as opposed to individual projects and tasks). Social capital can help teams endure challenges through the establishment of genuine and supportive relationships (Eliacin, J. et al., 2018). This can be done by having good communication, taking initiative with team members, and avoiding indifference and passivity, thereby elevating teams to continued and self-sustained success (Stuart Tan, 2015). Social events should be offered on a regular basis.

Creativity should be encouraged in both physical spaces and problem solving for student success, as participants expressed it as a critical component of resiliency. Allow people to use it, be curious, and proactive, so as to prepare for the unexpected. This may mean capitalizing on down time (summer, for example, in higher education), pursuing professional development in passion areas, or just generally providing more flexibility when schedules are less demanding. Develop systems and patterns that can be relied upon when challenges arise, so that energies can be directed towards student care rather than administrative or procedural burdens.

One's personal motivations proved to be one of the strongest protective factors to prevent stress and burnout in these high stress positions. When asked what participants found the most rewarding about their jobs, 11 out of 18 said, "the students are the reward." Seventeen out of 18 participants said "the chance to make a difference" was the most rewarding. Of particular interest was the fact that none of the participants mentioned finances as a reward. In fact, the opposite was often true; they expressed the desire to be paid well but acknowledged that working in higher education did not always yield a high or even competitive salary. Finances were not a significant motivator for many participants. Whatever it may be, tapping into the personal reasons and motivation that drives someone to do this hard work is critical to ensure longevity and resiliency. Remembering why one does the work, why they initially were inspired to pursue this profession, or how they have been able to help others in the past can be a strong motivator to continue when things become stressful. Finding meaning in one's job often elevates it to a vocation, in a sense, where it becomes more of a calling than just a job. This is a critical protective factor in ensuring workplace resiliency and longevity (Gu & Day, 2013). Along with identifying personal motivations, it is useful for one to adopt a personal definition of resiliency.

It is also useful to note that many participants shared the benefits of working in higher education, as opposed to other professions or private practice. Knowing and promoting these benefits can be used to help with recruitment and motivation. One participant stated:

"Working in a university...you're kind of always at the forefront of trends, what's going on in the world, and what's going on in technology and research. It's pretty

hard to kind of get behind the times when you're working at a university. I just really like the community of it and kind of the shared goals and values overall. It's a very dynamic work setting.”

Others reported liking the variety of working in higher education between the student appointments, events, collaborative potential with other departments, etc. Departments can make efforts to highlight the benefits of working in higher education to help build motivation to engage in these roles over time (Gorman, 2023). While highlighting the benefits of working in higher education, leaders should also continuously consider systemic changes to support employee well-being.

Finally, in addition to systemic considerations, the most significant recommendation that emerged from the data is the need for faculty in high stress roles to engage in self-care on a regular basis. Almost all interviewees mentioned the need for self-care in mitigating stress and burnout. One participant mentioned the practice of it daily, not just in general or as a nice idea. Daily practices make the difference (Roche, 2019), and they can be different for each person. Of 18 participants, there were 18 different responses to the question, “Do you have any self-care strategies, and if so, how do they help you?” Being in helping roles does not lend itself to prioritizing one’s own needs, but it seems to be a critical part of protecting one’s well-being and fitness for the stress and demands of roles like these. One participant shared:

“You've got to take care of yourself. You've got to find something to do for self-care, and you and you've got to do it daily. Whatever that is...you've got to do it daily, you can't neglect it, and you've got to make it a priority. You have to be selfish when it comes to your self-care. And if you're not, you're not gonna last in

this field because, you know, it is overwhelming. The things we hear and see from our clients... things that I think when I was younger I would have been blown away, and thought, there's no way that's even possible in human beings.”

This underscores the gravity and the weight of the burdens that those in these roles often carry, and establishing consistent self-care strategies will help strengthen those in these high stress roles to be able to carry on the work, last over time, and be successful.

At the conclusion of this study, two surprising aspects of resilience emerged that are worth nothing. One was the idea that preparation is a significant component of resilience. This seems counterintuitive when considering that resilience is usually something one needs when something unpredictable or unexpected takes place. How does one prepare for something they do not expect? This idea has caused me to think about resiliency a bit differently. Another of the significant conclusions drawn from this project is that resilience, while having a general and agreed upon definition, requires a personal definition and adaptation for each person individually in order to be meaningful and effective. Alozazi, et al., (2023) states, “resilience may differ based on diverse experiences, cultures, and spiritual values, as evidenced by studies conducted in various countries” (p. 9). In other words, we must each determine what resilience means to us personally so that we can experience its phenomenon for ourselves in the most meaningful way.

For Further Study

Participants who shared their marginalized identities with me contributed unique perspectives, specifically regarding their experience of being neurodivergent and being LGBTQ+ in sometimes hostile environments. While no questions were directly aimed at

discovering these experiences, I would be interested to see how employee well-being is affected as a result of these experiences, which could perhaps warrant further study.

It is worth noting that for the purpose of this study, resilience is regarded as a positive adaptive strategy for coping with stress and adverse conditions, however according to resilience researchers Mahdiani and Ungar (2021), there is a dark side of resilience that deserves further study. They posit that resilience can actually be experienced as toxic stoicism, whereby the individual actually would be better off in a situation where they did not exhibit resiliency. Perhaps because it was a dangerous situation and the real risk is unable to be addressed, or because it prevents the individual from being vulnerable, they argue that there can be negative aspects of resilience as well. I agree that further study is warranted, and the more we learn about resiliency, both positive and negative, can help equip those in high stress positions in higher education and protect their well-being even more effectively.

In addition, the discovery of research regarding the relationship between ACEs (adverse childhood experiences) and resilience among therapists raised some interest that could be further explored, as it relates to transformative theory. A participant shared this research with me, and I found it to be strikingly relevant. The research primarily looked at social workers, but they found that social workers with high ACE scores were more likely to be resilient, but also to have maladaptive coping strategies, patterns, substance use issues, and poor professional misconduct and boundaries (Lee et al., 2017). They also can overcompensate resiliency with toxic stoicism. While no questions in the interview protocol specifically inquired about ACEs, several participants shared briefly about their childhoods and the reasons that led them to their current profession. If this study were

extended, I would recommend further research into the evidence of ACEs and their effect on longevity and resiliency of higher education faculty in high stress positions.

Finally, as the participants from the academic advising community were limited to Virginia Tech employees, I recommend further study to expand to academic advisors across the country (as the mental health practitioners were) to see if the findings would present more diversified results, due to the singular employer represented in this group.

Conclusion

In conclusion, understanding how faculty in higher education in high stress positions such as academic advisors and mental health practitioners build and maintain resiliency remains an important endeavor to ensure the well-being and retention of staff in these positions. We must take great care to serve and protect these individuals who make a significant impact on our students and campuses in higher education by paying close attention to their environment, leadership, and workplace communities to provide healthy environments in which they can thrive. Considering the power of resiliency, we can foster hope for both students and faculty through meaningful relationships.

“Relationships, like those between teachers and students, can be profound sources of hope. Knowing that someone sees us as valuable and believes in us is powerful medicine” (Larsen, 2020, para.8). As shown in the literature examined and research conducted, helping others build and maintain relationships can contribute to bolstering resiliency and increase longevity. This resiliency will prepare these staff for challenges that are sure to come and is a critical calling to those in higher education.

The more we can educate future academic advisors and mental health practitioners on the realities of what their role will entail and how they can strengthen and

support one another through those challenges, the more we will ensure that there are support networks available to withstand the pressures of these high stress roles. Additionally, the more we can support employees in these positions, the more we can support our students, ensuring a better and healthier future for us all.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Email Invitation to Participate

Subject Line: Invitation to participate in resiliency research interview

For Collegiate Counseling Centers listservs:

Hello,

My name is Lisa Racek and I'm the Office Manager at Cook Counseling Center at Virginia Tech.

I'm writing to see if I can interview you in regard to your experience in collegiate mental health. As the office manager in a large college counseling center and former student development professional, I'm aware of the heavy burdens often placed on counselors due to student distress, large caseloads, crisis coverage, etc. Why am I doing this? I'm also a masters' student in Leadership Studies, and this research project will form my thesis.

I hope that hearing your story will help me learn what factors contribute to resiliency and longevity in high stress positions such as yours, leading to potential ways to retain mental health practitioners and prevent burnout for future higher education faculty and staff. I am also interviewing academic advisors, as I believe both roles serve as the front line to student success and thriving.

Please see the attached information sheet and if interested or would like more information, you can fill out the short survey below. Please feel free to email me with any questions as well.

<https://virginiatech.questionpro.com/t/Aa2USZ221F>

Thank you for considering and have a great day,
Lisa Racek

For VT advisor's listserv:

Hello,

My name is Lisa Racek and I'm the Office Manager at Cook Counseling Center. I hope your summer is off to a good start!

I'm writing to see if I can interview a few of you in regard to your experience in advising. Having worked closely alongside some wonderful advisors for many years, I'm aware of

the heavy burdens often placed on you due to student distress, large caseloads, course registration deadlines, etc. Why am I doing this? I'm also a masters' student in the OMALS leadership program, and a research project is a degree requirement.

I hope that hearing your stories will help learn what factors contribute to resiliency and longevity in high stress positions such as yours, leading to potential ways to prevent burnout for future higher education staff. I am also interviewing mental health practitioners, as I believe both roles serve as the front line to student success and thriving.

Please see the attached information sheet and if interested or would like more information, you can fill out the short survey below. Please feel free to email me with any questions as well.

<https://virginiatech.questionpro.com/t/Aa2USZ221F>

Thank you for considering and have a great day,
Lisa Racek

Appendix B: Participation Survey

Principal Investigator: Dr. Eric Kaufman|IRB 24-641

Title: Factors that Contribute to the Resiliency and Longevity of Higher Education Faculty in High Stress Positions such as Advisors and Mental Health Practitioners

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research regarding resiliency and longevity in higher education roles. Please answer the following questions. For any questions, please contact Lisa Racek, lisaracek@vt.edu.

University Where Employed

Please select your role at your university:

- Academic Advisor
- Mental Health Practitioner
- Other

If other, please explain:

How long have you been in this role?

- 0-6 months
- 6-12 months
- 1-3 years
- 3-5 years

5-10 years

10+ years

Do you consider your role to be a "high stress" position? Why or why not?

Would you be interested in participating in an interview aimed at discovering factors that contribute to the resiliency and longevity of higher education employees in high stress positions? (by checking "yes" you are agreeing to participate if selected).

Yes

No

Maybe, please contact me

If yes, do you prefer a virtual or in-person interview (Blacksburg, VA employees only)?

Virtual

In Person

Contact Information

First Name

Last Name

Email Address

Appendix C: Information Sheet



RESILIENCY LONGEVITY AND YOU

Information Sheet for Participation in a Research Study



Principal Investigator: Dr. Eric Kaufman | IRB 24-641 | **Title:** Factors that Contribute to the Resiliency and Longevity of Higher Education Faculty in High Stress Positions such as Advisors and Mental Health Practitioners

You are invited to participate in a research study. This form includes information about the study and contact information if you have any questions. I am a graduate student at Virginia Tech, and I am conducting this research as part of my course work.

WHAT SHOULD I KNOW? If you decide to participate in this study, you will complete a brief survey and an interview. As part of the study, you will be asked about your experience in a high stress position at a university, specifically what environmental, leadership, and community factors contribute to your resilience and longevity in the role. Interviews will be recorded for the researcher's data collection.

The study should take approximately 30-45 minutes of your time.

We do not anticipate any risks from completing this study. You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

CONFIDENTIALITY: We will do our best to protect the confidentiality of the information we gather from you, but we cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality. Any data collected during this research study will be kept confidential by the researchers. Your interview will be audio-recorded using a digital recorder and then transcribed. The researchers will code the transcripts using a pseudonym (false name). The recordings will be uploaded to a secure password-protected computer in the researcher's office. The researchers will maintain a list that includes a key to the code. The master key and the recordings will be stored for 5 years after the study has been completed and then destroyed.

WHO CAN I TALK TO? If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Lisa Racek, lisaracek@vt.edu, 540-231-8158. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the Virginia Tech HRPP Office at 540-231-3732 (irb@vt.edu).

TO TAKE INTEREST SURVEY: 

<https://virginiatech.questionpro.com/t/Aa2USZ22IF>



Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Factors that Contribute to the Resiliency and Longevity of Higher Education Faculty in High Stress Positions Such as Advisors and Mental Health Practitioners

Principal Investigator: Dr. Eric Kaufman, IRB 24-641

Pre-Session Conversation

The interviewer summarizes the purpose of the study and reviews the information sheet. Provide another copy for their records. Interviewer asks if the participant has any questions before moving forward.

Ask - “Do you acknowledge your questions have been answered and you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, including being recorded, which will be used only for my research collection and documentation purposes?”

- Participant must acknowledge with verbal consent, which the interviewer documents.
- Begin recording (zoom/recording on/transcriptions requested).

Script

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. I’m going to ask you a series of questions related to your role at the university and what factors contribute to your success in this role. The purpose of this study is to determine which environmental, leadership, and other significant factors lead to the success and resiliency of people who perform high stress roles in higher education. It is our hope that through this study, we can discover what factors contribute to resiliency and longevity and can be further utilized to prevent burnout and turnover amongst university employees in high stress roles.

First I’m going to ask some **demographic questions** to get an idea of who you are and your role. Then I will ask questions related to the environment in which you work. Then I will ask questions related to your leadership structure. Finally, I will ask questions related to peer and community support. Feel free to elaborate on any questions you feel you’d like to as we work through the questions.

Let’s begin. My first question is:

1. What is your role at the university?
2. How long have you been in this role?
3. How many students do you have on your caseload per semester? Do you consider this to be a high number, and why or why not?

The next set of questions have to do with the **physical space and built environment** around you in your workplace.

1. Please describe your (physical) work environment. Do you feel you have what you need to perform your role adequately? Why or why not?
2. What about your work environment contributes to your effectiveness in your role?
 - a. Possible follow-up: What, in your opinion, is the perfect work environment for your role? Are there any factors like furniture, spaces, light, etc. that are critical?
3. What about your work environment detracts from your effectiveness, or adds to your stress in your role?
 - a. Possible follow-up: Please fill in the blank: If I had _____, I would be more _____ in my role.

Now we are going to move on to the next set of questions which have to do with **leadership structures** in your workplace.

1. Please describe the leadership structure in your organization, directly related to your position. No names need to be included unless you want to mention them.
2. How would you describe your most immediate supervisor's leadership style?
 - a. Possible follow-up: How does your most immediate supervisor's leadership style help you in your role?
 - b. Possible follow-up: How does your most immediate supervisor's leadership style hinder you in your role?
 - c. Possible follow-up: Please fill in the blank: If my supervisor was _____, I would be more _____ in my role.
3. Do you feel supported by your leadership? Why or why not?
 - a. Has there ever been a time where your leadership helped you through a hard time, or helped you continue when you were demotivated? If so, can you describe how they helped you?
 - b. Possible follow-up: What do you think is the ideal leadership structure for success in your role?

The next set of questions have to do with your **personal motivations and community support** in your workplace.

1. What do you find rewarding about your work?
 - a. Possible follow-up: What motivates you in your work?
2. What do you find draining about your work?
 - a. Possible follow-up: What demotivates you?
 - b. Possible follow-up: When you are demotivated or drained, what do you do to keep going?
3. Do you feel supported by your peers? Why or why not?
 - a. Possible follow-up: How do your peers contribute to your effectiveness in your role? How do they help you keep going when things are difficult?
4. What led you to pursue this role?
 - a. Possible follow-up: What do you like most about performing this role?
 - b. Possible follow-up: If you were to leave your job, why would that be?

The final set of questions are general to help provide some of your thoughts about resiliency and your role.

1. What advice would you give to someone considering a role like yours, to be able to last over time, and be successful?
2. When you think of resiliency, what do you think of?
3. Does your role require resiliency? Why or why not?
4. Do you have any self-care strategies, and if so, how do they help you?

Thank you for answering these questions. Is there anything else you'd like to add or wish I had asked in this interview?

Thank you for your time and participating in this study. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to utilize the contact information that can be found on the information sheet.

Appendix E: Participants' Advice

What advice would you give to someone considering a role like yours, to be able to last over time, and be successful?

Establish boundaries.

Take breaks when you don't even think you need them.

Start your day properly nourished and hydrated, because you never really know what's going to come up, and if you're starting from a deficit, you may not be as available as you need to be for those situations that come out of left field.

Have that separation, you know. Make sure that your job isn't your identity.

Make sure you like students.

Make sure that you are able to separate your own personal experience.

You can't control somebody else. The whole thing about you don't have the right, the resources or the responsibility. Just let it go like you could be there to be the coach.

Don't take it personally.

Focus on the positives, not the negatives, because there always could be negatives, no matter who's there. There's gonna be some people that are unreachable, but just focus on the positives.

I'm getting a lot better about delegating and letting it go, not answering emails till midnight.

Realizing you're not going to reach everybody.

Keep a strong network.

Reach out because typically somebody has a tip. That will be a time saver.

Don't be afraid to ask questions.

Being humble.

Be very intentional about taking some time to do professional development, or take some quiet time, or whatever kind of things keep you charged up.

Keep moving, don't stay in one position you know more than a couple of years. Have a kind of clear idea of what your goals are whether they are monetary or institutional. Don't be complacent in the same role. Don't think that the loyalty of an institution works both

ways. You are your own advocate, it's up to you to, you know, be serious about your career to keep it moving on an upward trajectory or in the direction that is, you know, satisfying or rewarding.

I think it's so important to have an organization plan that works best for themselves. I think the older I get the more I prioritize structure. And so I have a way that I format my caseload, and over time, as they stay on my caseload semester after semester, I can organize it effectively to really know how to categorize 300 plus students. I think that's really important for me. I also think understanding the resources and support structures for advisors is important, too. And getting involved. There's so many professional development opportunities for advisors. I think that's important.

Understanding what resiliency looks like for you is important as an advisor, because it can feel like it's a never-ending wave of chaos.

Yeah, I would encourage them to ask, instead of like the traditional question, like, What's a typical day? I would ask, how does the year fluctuate? Ask about the expectations on an advisor, because it is so much more than just planning classes. And so I think understanding that coming in is really important, because there are so many blurred lines, and that's also hard. So if somebody's not ready to do that or takes on too much of their students' struggles, instead of referring them out, I think that can be hard as well.

Being careful of your time and not overloading yourself. Allowing yourself to connect with students, but also find that balance of distance so that you're not taking their stress or trauma or anxiety and make it your problem to solve.

Coming up with either a process or whatever it may be, coming up with your system. Like okay, this is how this works and how I'm going to approach things.

Protecting yourself and staying on top of things.

Get a seasoned advisor as a mentor and hear what tools they've used that may not work for them.

You want to build a camaraderie with the students. You want to build a relationship, maybe not so much that friendship. Yeah, that's different. But you want to build a relationship that they trust you. They value you, they, you know that you value them. But you have to set boundaries with that because they're afraid to do certain things. And so you have to make sure that you tell them it's gonna be fine. We can fix it.

Learn the advising. Learn how to build those collaborations and relationships, you know, but then, also, you know, fold in things as you go through time. But don't jump in and start taking on everything that has to do with it. Give yourself some time to grow in that.

Just take care of yourself like you have to. Don't go home after, you know, 10 academic relief meetings in a row and cry because I can't believe these kids are having to deal with

all this. I've just learned to say, it's okay. Well, it is what it is, and I can't take that home with me. There's a lot you gotta leave behind, and find out ways to take care of yourself.

Ask, and connect with advisors across the whole entire university. Yeah, you know, go to things that you connect with them that you feel like, oh, I can email them about it, you know. That's the big thing. Make your net wide and keep that, too.

Take your time. find what your timeline is. Your own personal timeline is yours, and forget about everybody else's timeline.

Figure out your personal way of doing the work.

Learn how to not over function. I think to be able to leave at the end of the workday, to be able to leave things unfinished, to be able to have a better sense than I do of what is my responsibility and what are clients' responsibilities, and what is the system's responsibility.

I would recommend that people only go to centers where they have some sort of flexibility or some sort of control over when they pick up how many clients they pick up, what clients they pick up.

I'd recommend making sure that there's time for professional development and training. That's what's been most powerful to me is continuing to like, get better at what I do, and find the areas of passion and find the theories that really speak to me.

I'd say, keep learning and pursuing this work in a way that feels aligned.

I think resiliency is also leaving conditions that are not fruitful to the soil. You need to flourish. So, resiliency is like listening to yourself in what your brain needs, what you need to thrive. And then both seeking out, creating and pushing, for advocating, for that environment, for you.

You need to have a really good personal support system because the work can be draining. It can be very busy where you spend extra time after work, like going out and doing things, or going and making friends. And so it might be good to already have, like a built in support system as you venture into, I guess counseling center work.

Know that you're not going to be getting paid what maybe some of your counterparts in other industries are getting paid. but you know, have a willingness to look at what the other pros are of the job that those people don't have in their roles.

I just push through blindly at times, and I know that that's not a good tip, and that's not the way I want to keep doing it. I think, right now, working in higher ed and working in university counseling centers. It is a big struggle to harness your resilience.

Clear expectations. If you are someone that is achievement driven, based on financial compensation, be very considerate of what the financial compensation package is.

If you're going to choose this job, make sure you know what's important to you. And also make sure that you're in it for the right reasons.

Always be ready to self-advocate, always be ready to set down those boundaries and say no to things and remember to put your needs first.

So I think, like, environment is real, and not all environments are good environments for everyone. And so attending to that, like, who is the supervisor? What is the culture on campus? What is the culture in the office like?

Having meaningful relationships, having some type of larger philosophy, religion, spirituality to rely on has been important.

Also reminding myself that sometimes maybe it's a season, like this is going to be a rough season. And that has allowed me to take some perspective.

Try to depersonalize that but then, also, I think I get feedback that is constructive and critical. That is hard to hear. That is accurate. So be receptive to the feedback.

Having very strong boundaries. And I do not have my email or teams on my phone after work hours. I don't. And I have an automatic reply like, I'm not doing that outside of work. Set firm boundaries.

Constantly reminding yourself of why you do it, and like highlighting the successes and the privileges that we have because of this, you know, like, it's a privilege to hear people's stories. It's a privilege to get to see people grow. And I think whenever I'm feeling like, oh, I don't want to do this, it's so hard... that I'm like, oh, but I got to do all of these things, and I wouldn't be able to do it in a different setting.

Take breaks when you can.

Taking that time to recharge is super important.

Know what are the dynamics of the job you're being offered, because if it was, 'you need to, you know, full time be seeing students for 12 months,' then I would say I would have concern about burnout, and I'd say you probably need to make sure that you have your own therapist.

Know where your limits are. Don't try to take on more than you can handle. I typically see 5 to 6 people a day. You know, I can do more than that for a day or 2, but you know, usually by the time I get to the 6th or 7th one there's not much left in the tank, and I'm not providing good care, and that's not acceptable to me. So, I would say to someone, don't let that be acceptable to you.