

# THE TOOLBOX

A Teaching and Learning Resource for Instructors

## HELPING STUDENTS DEVELOP AND SUSTAIN THEIR RESILIENCE

A typical definition of resilience points to one's ability to rise above and learn from adverse situations (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Resilient people stumble but keep moving forward. While their progress may be slowed, it does not stop. In this issue of *The Toolbox*, we will explore strategies for promoting resilience in students' lives.

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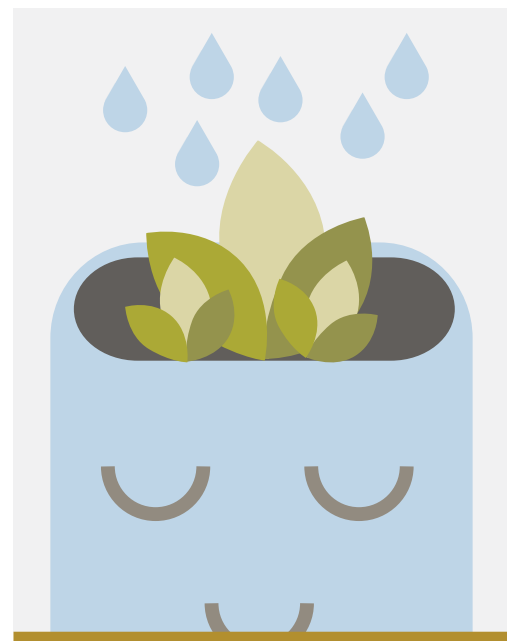
Retention initiatives are commonly designed to address those obstacles that often test students' resilience: inadequate finances, wavering self-efficacy, and limited academic preparation, to name a few. In tandem with such initiatives, instructors, advisors, and counselors have opportunities to help students boost their resilience on an everyday basis. This help can come in the form of a well-placed compliment, an encouraging note in the margin of an essay, a smile, or a referral to student affairs for needed resources. Effective instructors, in turn, can provide engaging opportunities for students to discover that their studies have purpose beyond the classroom and that their individual efforts greatly impact their prospects for success. Instructors should always remember their role as an important resource for enhancing students' resilient mindset.

In thinking about interactions with your students, consider adding the following five action steps as a path to building resilience.

### Action Step 1: Share Your Journey

At times, students may believe their life circumstances are so overwhelming as to make finishing college an impossible dream. Without adequate role models or mentors, they might feel like impostors, telling themselves, "I don't belong here. What was I thinking?" Those thoughts become their story.

We all have stories. Each of us has arrived at this point in our lives with experiences that have shaped us. Your successes and challenges have influenced your journey—and your journey has provided opportunities for more successes and challenges. It is important to remember that students bring their own individual journeys to their college experience.



“ Life doesn't get easier or more forgiving. We get stronger and more resilient. ”

— Steve Maraboli,  
American researcher,  
in *Life, the Truth, and  
Being Free* (1999)

For this action step, start by considering how your journey—your story—can inspire your students. Perhaps you were a first-generation college student, or maybe you had to work to support yourself during college. Maybe your college career began with developmental education classes and you eventually earned your doctorate. Or maybe you were a single parent taking classes at night to advance toward your dreams. When shared appropriately and authentically, your story can be an inspiration to others. It could be what the student in the back of the room needs to hear that day.

## Action Step 2: Connections and Disconnections

We can help students process the connections and disconnections related to their perceived priorities and the path toward accomplishing those outcomes. For this step:

- » Have students draw a line down the center of a page, creating two columns. Ask them to label the top of the left column “My Priorities.” Above the right column, use the header “My Activities.” In the left column, have them list three to five current priorities in their lives. In the right column, have them list three to five activities that take up most of their time in a typical week. When they are done, have them compare the information in the two columns.
- » To advance the conversation, guide them in identifying the connections and disconnections between what they say is important (i.e., priorities) and what they do (i.e., activities). If, for example, a student lists their college education as a top priority, but homework does not appear in the top five of their activities column, a clear disconnect exists. At the least, there is a need for a conversation about aligning their priorities with their activities.
- » Who might be able to help students better connect time and priorities? A good starting point is for them to find a partner in the class and share the results of their work, along with any insights gained. Through further conversations, you can help students better understand that resilience (i.e., adaptability, learning, growing sustainability) requires understanding how they act and the patterns of those behaviors.
- » As a final activity, ask students to relabel the column headings, changing “My Priorities” to “Stories I Tell Myself” and changing “My Activities” to “Stories I Live.” Follow-up questions could include:
  - » How can they adjust their activities to be true to their priorities? Perhaps they misidentified those priorities.
  - » Can they eliminate any negative influences that might distract them from achieving their stated priorities?

## Action Step 3: The Second R.E.A.D.

By helping students examine their goals, we can help them see that having *a* goal might not be as important as having the *right* goal. Like us, students can become disconnected from what is most important to them. Perhaps they are pursuing a major that does not complement who they are or what they value, for example. One way to help is to show them how to give projects and goals a “Second R.E.A.D.” (Piscitelli, 2019).

- » **Relationships.** When they consider signing up for a project or activity, have students evaluate the people with whom they will be involved. If they are joining a study group, can they collaborate with the other

## NEW RESOURCES ON THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE



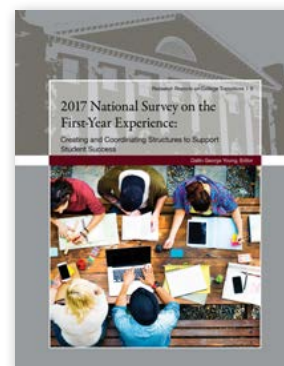
### Promoting Belonging, Growth Mindset, and Resilience to Foster Student Success

By Amy Baldwin, Bryce Bunting, Doug Daugherty, Latoya Lewis, and Tim Steenberg

**Paperback**  
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(Available January 2020) **\$30.00**

**Ebook**  
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**Library Ebook**  
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(2019) **\$95.00**



### 2017 National Survey on the First-Year Experience: Creating and Coordinating Structures to Support Student Success

Edited by Dallin George Young

**Paperback**  
ISBN 978-1-942072-32-4  
(Available July 2019) 180 pages. **\$25.00**

students in that group? As they learn more about their career paths, what do they know about the types of people who might be drawn to a specific career? Before they put themselves in an untenable or stressful situation, ask them to pause and reflect on the people involved and how they can gain credible information about these possible future relationships.

- » **Excitement.** Do students show enthusiasm for tackling the work needed to complete a project? How will they be able to stay resilient during tough times? Have they considered the practice time for a team sport, for example, or the number of years required for an advanced degree?
- » **Authenticity.** While pursuing a goal, and once they attain the goal, can students be their authentic selves? Will they have to bury their identity in order to fit in? Is this important to them? Will they be content to deny who they are in pursuit of a goal?
- » **Difference.** Will this project or goal make a difference in the lives of the people with whom students work and serve?

While resilience is about learning from and overcoming adverse circumstances, it can also be helpful and healthy to prepare for challenges and obstacles before they occur.

### Action Step 4: Gratitude

When we focus on the good of others, we not only connect with them, but we amplify our own good feelings and physical health. Emmons and Stern (2013) observed that the practice of gratitude “can lower blood pressure, improve immune function, promote happiness and well-being, and spur acts of helpfulness, generosity, and cooperation” (p. 846). Moreover, while gratitude cannot eliminate adverse situations that students face, finding a lesson or some value in an unpleasant situation can help them move forward. Watkins, Cruz, Holben, and Kolts (2008) found that “grateful reappraisal of unpleasant memories may help individuals emotionally process these events, thus bringing emotional closure to these incidents” (p. 87).

A gratitude exercise can help students focus on the blessings and positive influences in their lives. As an example, consider asking them to write and deliver a word of appreciation to a person or group, whether in person or via U.S. mail, email, or text. Following is an example:

**“Gratitude amplifies, rescues, and connects.”**

— Robert A. Emmons

At times, in a world challenged by agitation, anxiety, and anger, we may forget to pause to appreciate and acknowledge the good people in our lives. I have promised myself to send at least one “GRATITUDE” note per day for the entire year of 2019 to people like you who make our world a better place. Know that you help amplify, rescue, and connect our world—one kind action at a time. We need more people like you. THANK YOU!

Students could accompany such a note with specifics on why they are thankful for the recipient’s contributions to them or the community. This could be a “one-and-done” activity, or they could commit to writing at least one gratitude note per day for a week, a month, or a semester.

# ONLINE COURSES

ON THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE AND STUDENTS IN TRANSITION

**AUG. 12 - SEPT. 6, 2019**

**APPLYING STUDENT DEVELOPMENT THEORY TO COLLEGE TRANSITION PROGRAMS**

Instructor: Tracy L. Skipper, PhD

**Registration deadline: Aug. 5, 2019**

[WWW.SC.EDU/FYE/OC](http://WWW.SC.EDU/FYE/OC)

INSTITUTE ON

PEER EDUCATORS

July 29 - 31, 2019 | Columbia, SC

Register by

**July 22, 2019**, at:

[WWW.SC.EDU/FYE/IPE](http://WWW.SC.EDU/FYE/IPE)



WASHINGTON, D.C. | FEBRUARY 20, 2020

**SECOND PROPOSAL DEADLINE**

**AUGUST 8, 2019**

The First-Year Experience movement has expanded to include different countries, cultures, and educational contexts. Representing a combination of invited and proposal-driven content, this forum is structured to share international knowledge on student success, expand your network, and help you learn about both the shared and unique aspects of FYE across the globe.

Please visit [bit.ly/proposalBIF](https://bit.ly/proposalBIF) to submit your conference session proposal by the second-call deadline of August 8, 2019.

## Action Step 5: Now Is My Time

Students can lose momentum as the semester goes along. You can employ this last strategy at midterm or toward the end of the semester, when students might need to pause, breathe deeply, and move forward. Encourage them to celebrate what they have accomplished during the semester (the past) and what lies ahead (the future), but more importantly, nudge them to remember that what they become today (the present) will move them along their journey. Consider sending an email like this to your students:

Good morning!

You have arrived at the home stretch of the semester. Now, you can see what you have accomplished. Congratulate yourself. And get ready to cross the finish line with style and grace!

More than likely, you encountered a few stumbles and outright failures. You could slap your forehead and ask, "What in the world was I thinking/doing/not doing?" and then beat yourself up. Or you could ask, "What did I learn from that experience?"

Here is a quick strategy to keep your energy and passion flowing. Repeat the following out loud: "Now is MY time!" Say it again. "Now is MY time!"

Yes, you might have lots of non-negotiable responsibilities with family, children, work, and school in your life to tend to. At times, you might even feel like quitting. Remember that each day brings you closer to your dreams—but only if YOU continue to move toward your dreams. This is your time. What will you do with it?

Look forward to a wonderfully energizing end of the semester. And remember to say, and mean it, and be it: "Now is MY time!"

These action steps, combined with what you already do every day as an instructor, can help students visualize their purpose and journey, prioritize their resources, and eliminate what no longer serves them, while strengthening their resolve to enhance growth and resilience.

## REFERENCES

- American Psychological Association. (n.d.). *The road to resilience*. Retrieved April 1, 2019, from <https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience>
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## Submission Guidelines for The Toolbox

For complete guidelines and issue dates, see [www.sc.edu/fye/toolbox/](http://www.sc.edu/fye/toolbox/)

**Audience:** *Toolbox* readers include full-time and adjunct faculty; academic advisors; and administrators focused on faculty development, teaching and learning, academic success, and the first college year.

**Style:** Articles, tables, figures, and references should adhere to APA (American Psychological Association) style.

**Length:** Original articles should be no longer than 1,500 words. The editor reserves the right to edit submissions for length.

Submit your article online by using our [submission form](#).

### Please address all questions to:

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## About The Toolbox

*The Toolbox* is an online professional development newsletter offering innovative, learner-centered strategies for empowering college students to achieve greater success. The newsletter is published six times a year by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina.

The online subscription is free. To register for newsletter alerts and access back issues, please visit [www.sc.edu/fye/toolbox](http://www.sc.edu/fye/toolbox).

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