Academic Resilience in First-Generation Latina/o Students

By

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DEDICATION

To my amazing wife, Janelle: You have given me the time, feedback, patience, and encouragement to reach this goal. I am forever grateful for your love and support!

To my son, Joren: May the joy of learning be with you always! Let resilience help you to thrive and be your response to life's challenges.

To my parents, Bob and Joan: Dad and Mom, I am thankful for your enthusiastic support, feedback, resilience-themed news articles in my mailbox, overnight stays on class weekends, and writing retreats at your home. A special thanks to my mom, a lifelong example of resilience.

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ABSTRACT

Academic Resilience in First-Generation Latina/o Students

The transition to college, combined with abrupt changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic and online learning, has increased challenges for first-year college students. Resilience theory, defined as the study of how people rebound from adversity, can help us understand how students triumph over challenges during an unprecedented time of change and uncertainty. Through narrative interview techniques and analysis of campus survey data, this qualitative study examines the meanings and experiences of academic resilience among seven first-generation Latina/o students in their first semester at University of California, Merced. Five female and two male participants were interviewed at the mid-point and at the end of their first semester of college. Connection to their environment, not fearing failure, agency, self-efficacy, and survival captured participants' meanings associated with resilience. The themes of *connecting, helping,* and *storytelling* summarize how students make meaning and experience academic resilience, engage in protective processes, and navigate mid-semester adversities and interventions. They also communicate the dynamic, situational, and process orientation of academic resilience.

How students positively adapt to academic difficulty as they begin their college career provides a rich understanding of resilience. These understandings can be used to structure systems and processes that activate academic resilience habits early in a student's college experience. Building a strengths-based curriculum featuring first-year success courses, living learning communities, job and internship opportunities, and reflective experiences are key recommendations for policy and practice resulting from this study.

This author posits *reciprocal resilience* as a systems-based model where members both contribute to and benefit from the collective persistence of their community. Future research on

the responding and harmonizing actions between *connecting, helping,* and *storytelling* themes can enhance the understandings of reciprocating relationships that activate resilience.

Keywords: Academic resilience, reciprocal resilience

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Nearly three million freshmen started college in the fall of 2020 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). For many students, high school came to an abrupt end when classes were cancelled or completed online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Students did not finish sports seasons or the music concerts and theatrical performances for which they prepared. Special events and graduation ceremonies were eliminated or changed. Concern about the pandemic and its effects will continue to impact new students in college where collective mental health issues have already risen to crisis levels (National Council on Disability, 2017) and unfamiliar online learning environments may not offer enough support to foster the sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019) and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982) essential to their academic success. For first-generation Latina/o students, COVID-19 has added another layer of adversity in transitioning to college. A disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 virus in many of their home communities, a lack of affirming college climates, and persistent inequities in graduation rates, indicate a need to understand how first-generation Latina/o students overcome barriers to succeed. Resilience theory, defined as the study of how people rebound from adversity, can help us understand how students triumph over challenges. Grounded in resilience theory, this study examines the meanings and experiences of academic resilience among first-generation Latina/o students in their first semester of college. Understanding how students positively adapt to academic difficulty as they begin their college career provides a rich understanding of resilience that might influence their success in college and throughout life.

Problem Statement

Latina/o students are especially challenged by current events and the college transition. Early research efforts on the impact of COVID-19 has indicated that families of color are disproportionately affected by the virus (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020), because they are more likely to live in dense urban settings, have less financial flexibility for unexpected challenges, and are not able to work from home. Whether the impact is direct or indirect, Latina/o students and their families may have new challenges layered upon existing adversity. For example, while high school graduation rates have improved for most students, persistent gaps in graduation rates for students of Latina/o backgrounds remain (Posselt et al., 2012). Although first-generation Latina/o students experience transition issues common to many students, they also experience alienation, cultural challenges, unwelcoming campus climates, and frequent microaggressions (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Cavazos et al., 2010; Morales, 2011; Paredes-Collins, 2012). Because first-generation Latina/o students face additional adversities, resilience theory can help us understand the protective assets and processes which undergird adaptation in the face of adversity.

Educational administrators throughout the University of California system have used the word *resilience* to commission workgroups, encourage communities, and celebrate positive adaptation in light of COVID-19 disruptions to academic and student life (G. Camfield, personal communication, June 4, 2020; May, 2020; Nies, 2020). Yet, despite the ubiquitous use of this term, there is a need for a greater understanding in how to activate resilience. Within diverse student populations, resilience research challenges deficit-model perspectives by showing that success can be achieved if the focus is on processes that educators and their students have the power to change (Padrón et al., 2000). Given the dynamic and situational nature of resilience,

researchers have encouraged focusing on specific domains of resilience (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Rutter, 1993). This study's focus on academic resilience provides a precise lens in which to understand academic success among first-generation Latina/o students. Academic resilience is a process of developing academic success despite obstacles (Morales, 2010). First-generation Latina/o students have used academic resilience to navigate marginalizing forces that involve social, economic, and cultural adversities (Alva, 1995; Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Ceja, 2005; Earvolino-Ramirez, 2007; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000). Among this population of students, resilience has also been viewed as an act of resistance, a way to succeed and embrace their story in spite of the challenges (Brown, 2014; Reyes, 2012). Through this study, I have extended our understandings of academic resilience by exploring how first-generation Latina/o students in their first-year of college make meaning of academic resilience and engage in protective processes to overcome adversity.

Purpose Statement

The central purpose of this study is to understand the meaning and experiences of academic resilience among first-generation Latina/o students at a diverse public research university. Using a qualitative approach, I sought to understand academic resilience through student's stories communicated through writing and spoken words (Mischer, 1995).

The University of California, Merced (UC Merced) is positioned as an appropriate environment for this research due to its highly diverse population, unique protective interventions, and *resilience* as an established hallmark of undergraduate education. Built in 2005, the 21st century university has developed a strong mission of educating underserved student populations in California. With over 60% being first-generation college students and Latina/o students representing over 55% of the undergraduate population (UC Merced Fast

Facts, 2020), UC Merced is on the leading edge of higher education's changing demographics (Medina, 2018). Since 2015, UC Merced has listed "respond[ing] with resiliency to obstacles and challenges, and learn[ing] from failure" as a Hallmark of the Baccalaureate Degree (UC Merced Hallmarks, 2019). While making it an important goal for all students, the university has not referenced student's experiences or offered specific examples of resilience in this goal. Using student voices, this study has contributed to a greater understanding of academic resilience that can shape curriculum, supports, and development of a resilience-fostering community.

Beyond this statement, the university has put into action a number of unique interventions and protective processes to support first-generation students of color and build academic resilience. Innovative university wide mid-semester grade reporting and interventions are examples of how students' academic recovery is supported. At UC Merced, all first-year students receive mid-semester grades. Students with a D or F in any class are required to undertake targeted interventions to assist them in their academic recovery. Mid-semester grades are not recorded on official transcripts and participation in targeted interventions were not a requirement of this study. Instead, this researcher used the timing of mid-semester processes as an opportunity to prompt participant's reflections on academic challenges and positive adaptation. Understanding student's initial experiences of resilience may influence their entire college trajectory.

Research Question

Given UC Merced's Hallmarks of the Baccalaureate focus on resiliency, my primary research question is:

1. How do first-year first-generation Latina/o college students make meaning of and experience academic resilience?

a. What are the protective processes students leverage when faced with academic adversity?
b. In what ways may students display or express academic resilience when navigating mid-semester interventions?

Conceptual Framework

Resilience theory includes adaption to a wide variety of trauma and adversity, so in this study, I operationalized academic resilience as how first-generation Latina/o students adapt to academic difficulty. For this study, I am embracing *academic difficulty or academic adversity* terms to include performative assessment markers (e.g. grades), processes (e.g. time management), expectational, and cultural challenges. I have outlined resilience theory and protective processes conceptual frameworks that have shaped this study given that academic resilience is situated within resilience literature.

Resilience Theory

Resilience theory has changed since its origins in research over 50 years ago. Evolving from the term *invulnerable* in psychiatric literature, the concept was originally considered a personality characteristic (Earvolino-Ramirez, 2007; Pines, 1975; Rutter, 1993; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). Seen as a static characteristic, invulnerable no longer reflects our complex understanding of this concept (Rutter, 1993). Within the resilience theory research community, some have warned against using the specific term *resiliency* (compared to resilience) as it can be interpreted as a characteristic of an individual (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). In using this interpretation, resiliency in an individual could be construed as the primary reason for negative outcomes (Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). I am using the term *resilience* to situate the concept as a dynamic process rather than a static personal trait.

As a dynamic process, the "ongoing transactions between the [person] and environment" differentiate resilience from other related personality-driven concepts (Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008, p. 30). The dynamic nature of resilience was first introduced by Michael Rutter (1985) who stated that resilience is the ability to bounce back from adverse circumstances. Previously conceived as an internal state of mind, Werner (1993) is credited for expanding resilience research from merely acknowledging what Rutter termed "adverse circumstances" (Rutter, 1985) to include exploration of diverse and nuanced adverse external conditions, socioeconomic circumstances, and other environmental factors. Luthar & Cicchetti (2000) have further refined the understanding of resilience to include two key defining characteristics: exposure to adversity and positive adaptation.

How institutional, environmental, and individual factors support reduction of adversity can be summarized in two resiliency theory models. The compensatory model focuses on the reduction of adversity through protective processes, while the challenge model emphasizes that a moderate amount of stress can act as an enhancer of competence (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Since I am interested in protective measures that students use to overcome barriers, I have aligned my research with the compensatory model.

More recently, resilience theory has been applied in educational environments and students. Increasingly, resilience research in education has moved from a focus on students' dispositional factors to understanding the roles educators play in making schools "resiliency-fostering institutions" (Henderson & Milstein, 1996, p. 2). Within the field of education, resilience development is now connected to fostering mindfulness, empathy, and compassion (Brown, 2014; Arizona State University, 2020). For example, Shame Resilience Theory addresses dealing with othering by dominant social structures and cultures through protective

processes that involve connecting with our authentic selves, building relationships, and engaging in empathy (Brown, 2014). In higher education, college students have noted that resilience is fostered through meaning making, goal setting, faith, relationships, and self-awareness (Southwick & Charney, 2018; Sherman, 2019). Affirmation of assets also helps build resilience and success, especially among minoritized populations (Sherman, 2019; Walton & Cohen, 2011; Yosso, 2005). My study has brought conceptualizations of resilience theory together to understand new students' academic experiences in rich and descriptive ways.

Resilience In This Study

In focusing on recommendations in the literature to clearly define domains, specific development periods, and situational turning points (Rutter, 1993; Super & Harkness, 1986; Werner, 1993), I have chosen to focus on academic resilience at the mid-semester point of students' first-year. In borrowing from Luthar and Cicchetti's (2000) definition, I have operationalized academic resilience to mean positive adaptation to academic adversity. Academic determination and academic performance are similar terms referenced in literature, yet these terms often are focused on individual effort (Schreiner et al., 2012) and defined by achievement of performance markers (Cheng & Catling, 2015; Elizondo-Ontana et al., 2010). Likewise, concepts such as grit and hardiness are often conflated with academic resilience, but their focus on individual effort and ability does not fully account for the external barriers to student success. Academic resilience embraces individual agency along with consideration of environmental adversities and protective processes. Rather than linking resilience outcomes with university-determined academic performance measures, my research focused on student meanings of academic resilience from social, emotional, and intellectual perspectives.

Protective Factors and Processes

Protective factors are defined as "characteristics of the [person], family, and the wider environment that reduce the negative effects of adversity" (Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008, p. 32). While not limited to educational environments, Werner's (1993) longitudinal study concluded that individuals' perceptions of the value of adversity and protective factors "will vary with the prevailing values and role expectations of a given culture" (p. 514). Therefore, a university's cultural climate plays a key role in shaping expectations that help or hinder students from leveraging protective factors. A caring and supportive school environment is a distinguishing protective factor in resilience research (Henderson & Milstein, 1996; Rutter, 1993; Southwick & Charney, 2018). Rather than focusing on static protective factors, Rutter (1987, 1993) argues *protective processes* reflect the dynamic orientation of resilience and how personal adaptations, family environments, and institutional processes intersect and contribute to academic resilience. While we have some understanding of protective factors, we are only beginning to understand how to foster protective processes that impact resilience (Rutter, 1993). This is because there is no single tool or quick fix for fostering resilience that works for every individual. For example, Rutter (1987) warns that protective outcomes can differ because they are subject to variations among people and circumstances. Rutter (1993) further categorizes protective processes in three main areas, "reducing exposure to adversities, reduction of negative chain reactions to adverse exposures, and activities that promote self-esteem and efficacy" (p. 630). In considering Rutter's (1993) three protective processes in the educational context, it places significant responsibility on institutions to create a culture that supports students by reducing adversities and providing pathways to overcome barriers. First-generation Latina/o students bring to college protective processes gained from family, culture, and life experiences

(Ceja, 2005; Gardara, 1995). While my research is primarily grounded in resilience theory, Cultural Community Wealth (Yosso, 2005) also reflects the assets and ways of knowing that students may draw upon as protective processes. Given the focus on first-generation Latina/o students in this study, "learning from the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged" (Yosso, 2005, p. 69) is an explicit way I have included culturally relevant assets in my research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

As noted in the conceptual framework section, the definition of resilience has evolved from a personality trait to a dynamic process influenced by individual agency, community, and environmental supports. Resilience as a way to study the "abnormalities" of human behavior in the medical field has given way to a success-orientated framework used by social scientists to understand how people of all backgrounds thrive. Since the mid-1980s, development of resilience research "is arising not only from social scientists but also from educators who are beginning to understand the need for schools to be resiliency-fostering institutions for all who work and learn in them" (Henderson & Milstein, 1996, p. 2). Despite substantial amounts of resilience research in educational contexts and among children, it remains under-researched in higher education.

This review of resilience literature in educational contexts creates a broad research foundation for this study. It also frames the study of academic resilience as part of the interconnected and cumulative nature of all educational experiences. Building upon this foundational work, the literature review progresses to a focused synthesis of literature on academic resilience, first-generation Latina/o students, and protective processes. Review of the research related to the specific questions and population focus of this study has helped to fortify the limited body of resilience research in higher education.

Resilience in Education

Rutter (1987, 2003) notes that schools are spaces where the resilience of students can powerfully be addressed. An implicit value of education in the United States is the ability to change and grow through learning in the academic and social environment of school. A caring

and supportive school environment is a distinguishing protective process in resilience research (Henderson & Milstein, 1996; Rutter, 1993; Southwick & Charney, 2018). Specifically, educators play a key role in fostering resilience by creating a supportive school environment where trust is built and relationships thrive (Erickson, 1963; Henderson & Milstein, 1996; Werner & Smith, 1988). Esquivel et al. (2011) shared that K-12 effective schools:

> minimize the risk and adversity to their students to the maximum degree possible, maximize protective factors available to their students through whatever means, and take whatever means and steps necessary to intervene early and boldly when students show early evidence of social or emotional disturbances or disorders (p. 650).

Because it involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that anyone can learn, resilience is especially suited for studying within student populations. Resilience research challenges deficit model perspectives by showing that success can be achieved if the focus is on processes that educators and their students have the power to change. Padrón et al. (2000) study of English language learners identified "alterable factors that distinguish successful from less successful students" (p. 1). Maholmes (2014) notes efficacy beliefs are essential to developing resilience in children. Belief in one's ability to achieve a goal can be fostered "through relationships to help children to see their own potential to accomplish specific educational tasks…" and to overcome educational challenges (Maholmes, 2014, p. 75). Interestingly, efficacy development in K-12 students through parental engagement, school relationships, learning opportunities, and exposure to a culture of achievement (Maholmes, 2014) parallel similar resilience-building protective processes in college students.

While acknowledging connections between resilience research at different educational levels, more emphasis on the success of college students is needed, given the persistent inequities

of postsecondary achievement (Morales & Trotman, 2004). In the following sections, I will build upon broader understandings of resilience research in education through a focused synthesis of academic resilience, protective processes, and the challenges faced by first-generation Latina/o students in the college environment.

Academic Resilience

Academic resilience refers to a process in which students overcome barriers and adversities to succeed academically. Morales and Trotman (2004) and Morales (2010, 2012) frame academic resilience in the context of first-generation Latina/o students through numerous qualitative studies. These students exceed academically despite being "born and raised facing the infamous and ubiquitous stressors of ethnic minority and low economic status" (Morales & Trotman, 2004, p. 4). How students make meaning of and experience academic resilience, the research question for this study, builds upon research in this area and also challenges assumptions about how first-generation Latina/o students are conceptualized.

While a number of studies have not found resilience as a predicter of academic performance in college (Cheng & Catling, 2015; Elizondo-Omaña et al., 2010), this is not surprising given the complex, situational, and dynamic nature of this concept. A multiple regression analysis of scores on Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale, delayed gratification, and stress scales did not result in any measured factor predicting academic performance among 167 mostly White first-year United Kingdom college students (Cheng & Catling, 2015). No significant correlation between resilience and academic performance was found even when considering students in academic difficulty or recovery (Elizondo-Omaña et al., 2010). Comparing Mexican college students who were in a remedial course after failing with those taking the regular course for the first time, Elizondo-Omaña et al. (2010) found no correlation

between resilience and academic performance among the regular or remedial students. Both of these studies used the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale which was designed and tested for psychiatric use in clinical environments (Connor-Davidson, 2003). Perhaps rather than concluding an absence of correlation between resilience and academic performance, we might need to use a different tool to understand academic resilience in educational settings. Narrative interview techniques used in this study allowed for an exploration of academic resilience through a holistic lens of students' experiences in and outside the classroom.

Morales and Trotman (2004) and Morales' (2010, 2012) extensive research on the academic resilience of minority students in higher education provides a useful body of research on this subject. Using ethnographic interviews, Morales and Trotman (2004) explored the academic resilience of low socioeconomic status and minority college students. Morales and Trotman (2004) define academic resilience as the "process and results that are part of the life story of an individual who has been successful despite obstacles that prevent the majority of others with the same background from succeeding" (p. 8). Criteria for high academic achievement included being an ethnic minority, completion of 30 credit hours at a selective university, and earning at least a 3.0 GPA (Morales, 2010; Morales & Trotman, 2004).

Academic performance in the studies discussed above have been defined by grades, which does not explain the meanings students assign to experiences or how they define success. This study on academic resilience in first-generation Latina/o students expanded upon traditional academic performance outcomes to include academic engagement and well-being from intellectual, social, and emotional perspectives. Rather than only using performance-based criteria to select first-year student participants, this study has examined resilience from a diversity of perspectives using purposeful sampling.

Morales and Trotman (2004) and Morales (2010, 2012) have made major contributions to orientating academic resilience in higher education settings and addressing persistent achievement gaps through researching successful students of color. Yet, their work too readily accepts the expectation that most students of color will fare poorly in their academic endeavors. They argue that how to overcome a variety "unfavorable background factors" can best be understood from the resilience of exceptional individuals (Morales & Trotman, 2004, p. 7). Instead, more attention is needed to understand the *unfavorable conditions* in higher education and how systems within these environments create barriers to resilience. Rather than focusing on the exceptionality of academic resilience in successful students, this researcher orientates academic resilience as ordinary and accessible to all (Masten, 2001). In using asset-based frameworks, this study challenges how and by whom success is defined (Yosso, 2005).

First-Generation Students

Understanding how first-generation students are defined and the unique challenges they experience in higher education is important to this study. Simply, *first-generation* is defined as the first in one's family to attend college (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2017). Yet, many colleges and universities have used more inclusive criteria developed for federal TRiO program grants. This expanded definition includes students who have come from families who have attended some college but did not complete a four-year degree (Federal TRiO Programs, 1988). The varying definitions of *first-generation* between and within colleges was explored in a 2017 *New York Times* article (Sharpe, 2017). Among a data set of 7300 college students, the study found that students classified as 'first-generation' varied from 22 percent to 77 percent (Sharpe, 2017). Other researchers have problematized the idea that there is only a single way to be *first-generation*--as students' success pathways into, through, and beyond

college vary (Benson & Lee, 2020). This researcher has defined first-generation status as any student who self-identifies as the first in their family to attend college. This definition is used by a national higher education professional organization (NASPA) and the University of California system (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2017; First Gen University of California, 2020).

First-generation college students have unique challenges in the higher education environment. In a study that combined national survey data of 4000 students with 64 student interviews at selective universities, Benson and Lee (2020) found that first-generation students are more likely to come from low-income families and have less understanding about how to navigate opportunities in college. First-generation students in college are less likely to feel a sense of belonging and to persist to graduation (Benson & Lee, 2020). They also have lower participation rates in campus life, work longer hours, and have familial, cultural or community commitments that reduce the time they have to focus on academic success (Benson & Lee, 2020; Pascarella et al. 2004).

The layered identities of first-generation students also compound challenges. First-generation students who also are students of color experience addition challenges of racial harassment and social isolation (Benson & Lee, 2020) that can create additional barriers to academic resilience.

Latina/o Students

The Latina/o or Hispanic term is used to describe Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race (University of California, 2017). This term is also consistent with data collection terms used by the U.S. Department of Education (IPEDS, 2021). This researcher acknowledges the emerging

recognition of *Latinx* as pan-ethnic term that is more inclusive of gender and LGBTQ identifications (Meraji, 2020; Peñaloza, 2020). Yet, a recent Pew Research Center study found that only 3% of U.S Latinos use the term with slightly higher use among 18–29-year-olds (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020). Despite Latina/o being an imperfect term (Meraji, 2020; Peñaloza, 2020), I have chosen to use it to align with national data collection and university demographic classifications (IPEDS, 2021; University of California, 2017). While Latina(o)/Hispanic terms are used together for collection and reporting of student ethnicities (IPEDS, 2021; University of California, 2017), I have chosen to use Latina/o for clarity and consistency.

In addition to common first-year transition challenges, many Latina/o students experience financial uncertainties, language challenges, a lack of college preparatory resources, alienation from home cultures, unwelcoming campus climates, and frequent microaggressions (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Cavazos et al., 2010; Morales, 2011; Paredes-Collins, 2012).

Just as resilience theory has evolved, the diversity of populations receiving attention in studies has also expanded. Werner's (1993) longitudinal study, which began in 1979, is noteworthy for its focus on a population of color and research on resilience in adults. Spanning 40 years, this study focused on Kauai, Hawaii residents starting at birth through their mid-30s using a naturalistic research approach.

Others have built upon this study and used resilience theory to understand how Latina/o students navigate challenging and marginalizing forces (Alva, 1995; Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Ceja, 2005; Earvolino-Ramirez, 2007; Graff et al., 2013; Morales & Trotman, 2004; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000). In studying Chicana high school students' aspirations to pursue higher education, Ceja (2005) used resilience theory to understand how participants responded to social, economic, and cultural adversities. When studying populations of color who are exposed to high

levels of adversity, Ungar (2013) argues that more research effort should be devoted to the social environment that is often at the center of perpetuating marginalization. Cerezo and Chang (2013) studied social and cultural variables in college environments and found that involvement within a cultural community contributed to higher GPAs among Latina/o populations after controlling for ethnic background, social adjustment, and high school GPA factors. While their ethnicity was not a significant predictor of college GPA, Latina/o students beliefs about how they fit into a campus culture and the quality of connections with students of similar backgrounds played an important role in their academic success (Cerezo & Chang, 2013). Given the challenging social environment and dominant culture's power in many educational contexts, researchers have argued that disengaging and disidentifying with academic achievement can be seen as an act of resilience (Gayles, 2005; Portnoi & Kwong, 2019; Steele & Aronson 1995). Among women, including first-generation Latinas, academic resilience has also been viewed as an act of resistance, a way to succeed and embrace their story in spite of the challenges (Brown, 2014; Reyes, 2012). Yet, this researcher is operationalizing resilience as a hopeful act (Maholmes, 2014; Masten, 2011). Gayles (2005) writes:

> As a conceptual tool, the notion of resilience offered here works past the value-laden discourse of "risk," "adversity," and "negative environmental circumstances" that dominates much of the literature on this topic, encouraging us to supplement the innumerable stories of school failure with stories of success. A focus on resilience allows us to more completely frame the manner in which students engage schooling." (p. 251)

Research on student populations labeled as high-risk and at-risk have considerable overlap with Latina/o populations, given the systematic barriers these students have endured. While used extensively, high-risk and at-risk are problematic terms that often serve as

demeaning code words for minority populations who are deemed to be deficient in qualities and skills needed to be successful in college. Sriram and Vetter (2012) define *high-risk* students as those that are most likely to depart college before obtaining a degree. These researchers differentiate *high-risk* and *at-risk* terms by describing the risk for withdrawal as a continuum (high-risk) rather than a characteristic of students (at-risk). They also note that the high-risk term is generally accepted by practitioners and scholars (Sriram & Vetter, 2012). Sriram and Vetter (2012) present two studies to illustrate understandings of academic success in student populations defined as high-risk; one study is focused on understanding successful graduating seniors while another study described how to use an intervention to change the mindsets of high-risk students. How students think about themselves and their ability to succeed is a key factor in their success (Sriram & Vetter, 2012).

Because the majority of participants in this study are Latina, I am highlighting research particular to resilience and academic success in this population. Graff et al. (2013) used interviews to explore the resilience of five Latina college students who came from seasonal farm worker families. Their familial networks, value in hard work, and role modeling helped them overcome language, social, legal, and cultural barriers (Graff et al., 2013). While navigating these barriers created significant obstacles, Graff et al. (2013) noted the development of an internal locus of control and coping skills that ultimately propelled their academic success. Gloria and Castellanos (2012) also noted the complex influence of familial roles in academic persistence among first-generation Latinas in college. “Painful narratives” (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012, p. 87) shared by participants included their family’s questioning of decisions to leave home for school and accusations of abandoning family roles and values. Painful narratives combined with relatives’ inability to provide information or advice about the college transition

experience resulted in significant barriers to academic success for Latinas. While noting the challenges, Latinas also interpreted family concerns as a form of care and support for their well-being (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). Participants offered reassurances that school contributed to the betterment of their families. It helped initial fears and questions "evolve into support and pride" among relatives (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012, p. 87). It cannot be understated that participants also discussed the additional stress and pressure associated with having to preform for their families and in school. One Latina stated "I'm the one who makes them proud. It is an honor, but it's pressure. Gosh, I gotta make them proud." (First-Generation Latina Participant, as cited in Gloria & Castellanos, 2012, p. 88). Seeing themselves as role models helped participants balance competing family and college roles. "As much as the Latinas were pursuing their individual educational aspirations, they were equally acting on behalf of their families by introducing opportunities and providing avenues for others—a simultaneously stressful yet critical and rewarding process." (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012, p. 88).

In a mixed method case study involving Latina juniors, seniors, and recent graduates, Perez (2020) found that mentoring relationships were keys to student success. Through teaching students how to navigate the college system, caring advocacy, and creating bridges to campus resources, college counselors contributed to increases in Latina student retention and graduation rates.

While much of the literature is devoted to the challenges of first-generation Latina/o populations, these students bring assets and strengths to the higher education environment. Dumais and Ward (2009) noted the positive influence of familial and cultural capital on college enrollment, motivation, and persistence to graduation. Institutional systems and educators play a vital role in recognizing assets by confirming to students that they belong and have the ability to

succeed in college (Perez, 2020; Rendón & Muñoz, 2011). They design experiences where students see themselves as self-directed learners and proactively offer support and assistance (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011).

Protective Processes to Support Academic Resilience

The protective processes involved in students' academic resilience experiences are essential to understanding their stories of success. Protective processes have been researched from individual, familial, and community perspectives (Maholmes, 2014). In recent studies, efforts have been made to understand how protective processes intersect and overlap to aid students in developing academic resilience (Maholmes, 2014; Morales, 2004; Southwick & Charney, 2018). For this reason, this researcher has decided to show their interconnectedness by synthesizing protective processes into three major categories: hope, self-efficacy, and supportive relationships of belonging.

Hope

A consistent thread in resilience research is the presence of hope. Duncan Andrade (2009) cites an *audacious hope* as a critical force that associates with students of color who are suffering in our education systems. It is an active and critical hope that seeks to protect by interrupting positions of privilege that stockpile resources and marginalize others. Kenny et al. (2010) analyzes the motivational aspects of *work hope* in academic and career achievement among a sample of African-American and Latina/o high school students. "Interventions that enable youth to establish goals, develop clear plans or pathways for attaining those goals, and gain confidence and competence" helped to foster achievement (p. 211).

Often, hope is grounded in spiritual beliefs and driven by a sense of altruism (Sherman, 2019). In studies exploring holistic measures of student success, spirituality was a predictor of thriving among students of color (Paredes-Collins, 2012).

Self-Efficacy

A number of researchers have emphasized self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-awareness as important protective processes (Alva, 1991; Capella & Weinstein 2001; Gandara, 1993; Helland & Winston, 2005). In a national sample of 12th grade students, Capella and Weinstein (2001) compared self-reported data on psychological factors with academic performance markers. They found that an internal locus of control and positive expectations about the future predicted resilience. Helland and Winston (2005) shared that self-efficacy is activated "when a person is faced with a significant situation-specific goal that is valued by the individual" (p. 44). In a qualitative study of protective factors in academically resilient students of color, Morales (2010) also noted the connection between self-esteem, internal locus of control, and work ethic in developing academic resilience. A belief that their hard work would produce the academic performance they expected was an important finding (Morales, 2010).

Research on college students has also noted that resilience is fostered through protective processes that involve meaning making (Sherman, 2019; Southwick & Charney, 2018). In Sherman's (2019) study of college students with mental health conditions, participants noted that reflection on their learning from past adversities aided their ability to be resilient. In doing so, they recognized their mental health challenges as strengths in their recovery efforts and as assets to helping others. This finding speaks to Bandura's (2008) "resilient efficacy" in using past adversity experiences to successfully persevere through current and future challenges.

In a qualitative study of first-year students in their first semester, Morales (2012) described building academic efficacy through effective use of time, actively asking for help, and recognition of college expectations. In understanding protective processes that foster academic resilience, Morales (2012) noted the role of "early diligence" in institutional efforts to offer structural supports and academic scaffolding, especially during the first two weeks of the semester. Doing so "had a disproportionate influence on these students' perceptions of themselves as college students as well as their ultimate academic outcomes" (Morales, 2012, p. 99). Morales (2012) noted specific supports include mentoring programs and formative assessments that provide students timely and specific feedback on how to improve.

Walton and Wilson's (2018) review of 325 intervention studies showed how behavior in social contexts can be altered through brief intervention experiences that act as protective processes. Rather than targeting a lack of capacity or skills in people, effective protective processes work to help participants understand themselves in social situations and how meanings about these interactions can be altered (Walton & Wilson, 2018). Wilson (2011) called this process "story editing" and it fits well with this study's narrative techniques to understand academic resilience experiences.

Relationships and Belonging

Supportive relationships including peers, parents, and educators are among the most powerful protective processes. Ceja (2005) used resilience theory as a lens to understand how Chicana students interpret their parents involvement to shape their college aspirations. Through structured interviews, research participants explained how they negotiate social, economic, and cultural forces that affect their college aspirations. Key to resilience among these forces was the protective processes of Chicana parents in illuminating educational opportunity as a way of

escaping difficult conditions (Ceja, 2005). Through storytelling, support, and encouragement from their parents, students reinterpreted challenges as strengths and used them as motivation (Ceja, 2005). The protective power of parents can promote social and emotional skills needed for adaption throughout life (Jackson-Newsome et al., 2008), as examples of strong work ethic (Morales, 2010), and as sources of social and cultural capital that can be leveraged in new environments (Coleman, 1988; Yosso, 2005).

Morales (2010) looked at relational protective processes among 50 low-income college students of color through a series of semi-structured interviews. His findings stressed the importance of supportive peers and school staff who understand the unique transition challenges of students of color. Acting as cultural translators, they helped students understand academic terminology and connect the cultural competencies of college with their home culture. By using their education to contribute to their culture and family successes, students were able reconcile academic success with their racial-ethnic community. Parents' high expectations along with modeling hard work and sacrifice (Morales, 2010), helped students transfer these beliefs and commitments to their academic work.

Within the university community, relationships that build academic success are also closely tied to students' sense of belonging as a "function of perceived support from one's peers, teachers, and family members" (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 21). As "the most important driver of meaning," a sense of belonging influences how students process a wide variety of experiences (Smith, 2017, p. 56). Therefore, a sense of belonging can be a central driver in how students are processing academic resilience experiences. Walton and Cohen (2011) found that brief interventions to support a sense of belonging among freshmen African-American students had positive academic and health consequences over a three-year observation period. Participants

included African-American and European-American college students in their second semester of college. The intervention group was compared to a campus-wide control group of the same ethnic group and year in school. The intervention involved participants creating a brief testimonial that could be used by future struggling students. Because students were placed in a role where they were helping future students, they did not realize it was an intervention to support their success. The subtle nature of the intervention did not reinforce the sense of failure and stigma students felt when prompted to participate in an intervention to help them. Psychological responses to adversity were assessed through daily surveys in the week after the intervention and grade point averages (GPA) were recorded each term. The protective intervention raised African-American GPAs relative to the control groups and also contributed to their overall wellness as indicated by fewer doctor visits. Researchers believed the intervention prevented students from seeing adversity “as an indictment of their belonging" but rather as a temporary and ordinary part of college (Walton & Cohen, 2011, p. 1447). The intervention aided students’ academic resilience in how they made sense of social changes at critical time (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

Morales (2010) concluded with other researchers (Luther et al, 1993; Morales & Trotman, 2004; Ungar, 2013) that protective processes work in concert with each other. First-generation Latina/o students may use a greater variety and number of protective processes due to the additional barriers of racism and discrimination (Hurtado et al, 2015; Kitano, 1995).

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research Setting

The setting for this research was University of California, Merced, the newest campus of the University of California system. Opened in 2005, UC Merced is located in the Central Valley of California and is the fastest growing research university in the country. In the past 10 years, undergraduate enrollment has increased by over 600%. Only 9% of the undergraduate students are White, while over half of the students are Latina/o, another 19% are Asian (primarily south-east Asian), and about 4% are African-American (UC Merced Fast Facts, 2020). 73% percent of undergraduates are first-generation college students and nearly 64% are Pell Grant eligible with family incomes at or below federal poverty guidelines (UC Merced Center for Engaged Teaching and Learning, 2020). A recent article about the campus in the *New York Times* captured the uniqueness of the student population with a provocative question: "Is Merced the future of University of California?" (Medina, 2018). The question reflects the changing demographics of higher education in California (and in our nation) that are already a reality at UC Merced.

Campus Survey Data

I have drawn upon data from the campus's New Student Survey and UC Undergraduate Survey (IRDS, 2021) to communicate what is understood about student experiences. Although resilience is not discussed, students' perceptions of obstacles, efficacy, sense of belonging, and campus climate issues are included. This data helped to position my narrative interview questions in the context of UC Merced student experiences.

I also used campus survey data sources to test the validity of my results and to develop a more comprehensive understanding of first-generation Latina/o students at UC Merced. In using

ethnicity and first-generation status breakout parameters in the New Student Survey dashboard (IRDS, 2021), I learned how the larger population of first-year students at UC Merced compared to the seven students selected for my study. Given that five of the seven participants in my study were women, I also used the breakout parameter to compare male and female responses. The data from selected survey questions enriched the findings of this study and is presented in this chapter and chapter five.

New Student Survey

The New Student Survey is an annual campus assessment specifically designed to understand first-year students. The survey collects data on demographics and students' sense of belonging, habits, goals, and use of resources. It is administered between October and November and provides insight on first-year student experiences midway through their first semester of college. The survey did not experience major revisions to the questions and received a 47% response rate in 2020 (1,019 first-year students) (IRDS, 2021). The 2020 survey results indicated that nearly 60% of first-year students are experiencing emotional, academic, financial, and familial obstacles in their first semester with nearly 30% experiencing these challenges frequently or all the time (Table 1). Despite the frequency of these challenges, 90% of survey participants believe they can succeed academically and 82% indicate they can find resources and persevere when facing academic obstacles (IRDS, 2021). Data collected in the 2019 survey reflected similar responses for these questions (Table 1). Significant obstacles combined with strong beliefs about one's ability to adapt indicates a rich environment for studying resilience early in students' college careers.

UC Undergraduate Student Survey

The UC Undergraduate Student Experience Survey (UCUES) biennially "solicits student opinions on all aspects of the UC experience… covers most aspects of students' academic and co-curricular experience…[and] collects information about student behavior – their study habits and how they use their time" from every University of California campus (UC Undergraduate Student Experience Survey [UCUES], 2021). The 2020 survey was the latest publicly available data. It includes responses from all class levels of undergraduate students and is administered from April to June. Using publicly available tools on the UC Merced website, I filtered UCUES data to provide perspectives of UC Merced students as they complete their freshmen year. At the end of their first-year, 14% of freshmen indicated they did not "feel like they belonged at UC Merced" while 6% stated that their race or ethnicity was not respected on campus (IRDS, 2021). Of special interest in this data were campus climate issues that may create additional barriers to resilience (Table 2). Also, 9% of surveyed students indicated they often or very often heard negative views about races and ethnicities from their peers with 4% reporting similar experiences with administrators (IRDS, 2021). These percentages were similar to the results reported in 2018. Using the most current dashboard available, UC Merced students reported between 1% and 5% higher levels of concern with campus climate barriers compared to freshmen at other University of California campuses in 2018. This data speaks to the important role institutions must play in reducing adversities in the college environment and creating resilience-fostering conditions.

Table 1

Obstacles to Academic Success-New Student Survey Data 2019-2020

Question	Obstacle	Frequently/All the Time 2019	Frequently/All the Time 2020
How often are the following obstacles to student success?	Feeling depressed, stressed, or upset	31%	36%
	Underdeveloped study behaviors (e.g. wait until last minute, easily distracted, too much social time, too much web surfing)	37%	33%
	Difficulty studying (e.g. knowing how to start, how to get help, organize material)	27%	33%
	Paying for expenses	31%	32%
	Being able to cope with expectations of parents and family	25%	31%

Table 2

UCUES Campus Climate Data 2018 and 2020

Question	Often/Very Often 2018	Often/Very Often 2020
In this academic year, I have heard students express negative or stereotypical views about races or ethnicities.	9%	9%
In this academic year, I have heard non-teaching staff or administrators express negative or stereotypical views about races or ethnicities.	3%	4%

First-Year Seminar Course

Students selected for this study were in their first semester and enrolled in a first-year seminar course, Undergraduate Studies 10. The optional 1-credit semester course is centered on

students' personal, academic, and social success in college. It features assessments, discussion activities, and writing exercises to help students identify assets, goals, and actions that support success. First-year seminar courses are considered a high-impact success practice in higher education (Kuh et al., 2008); yet there is a need to understand what lever experiences within these courses can move students to new positions of understanding about themselves (Skipper, 2017). While student demographics are not collected in the course, they are similar to the ethnic diversity of the UC Merced campus. In teaching the course for over 10 years, it is the experience of this researcher that the majority of enrolled students are of first-generation status without a declared major. A focus on student development and success in the course provided an opportunity for students to explore understandings of academic resilience that may not be examined in other subject-focused coursework.

Mid-Semester Grades

This research project was conducted after the midpoint of the students' first semester at the university. Provided to all first-year students, mid-semester grades are coupled with university interventions and are considered protective processes by the university. Although mid-semester grades are not recorded on final transcripts, students who have a D or F grade are required to participate in an intervention that involves goal setting and reflection. This unique element of undergraduate education at UC Merced was piloted during the inaugural year of the university. Due to its success in supporting students through academic recovery, senate faculty voted to make it a permanent process each semester. While not comprehensively assessed in the last five years, previously collected data indicated that the majority of students involved in mid-semester interventions finished the semester with passing grades. This study did not aim to assess the effectiveness of the intervention on academic performance. Instead, studying possible

turning points during the students' first-year presented a unique opportunity to understand initial perceptions of academic resilience that may influence their entire college experience. The timing of mid-semester grades and interventions situate the student at an intersection of institutional feedback, adversity, personal reflection, and positive adaptation.

Methods

This study was designed to be descriptive in nature. Through two narrative interviews, this qualitative study revealed how students experience academic resilience in their first-year. The first-year of college is a period of significant transition both externally and internally. While these experiences are difficult to quantify, they offer a rich multifaceted perspective that qualitatively explores "social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 67) within individuals' experiences. Students are experts of their own experiences and understanding their stories has provided thick descriptions. Qualitative methods offer minoritized populations a voice in sharing their stories that is often missing in quantitative studies (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007); therefore, the narrative interview technique featured in this study was well suited for understanding experiences of first-generation Latina/o students. Eliciting stories is a central goal of the narrative interview method. The purpose of narratives are to "bring together disparate aspects of our experiences and making self and the world comprehensible" (Schiff, 2014, p. 4).

Recruitment of participants occurred over several weeks starting after mid-semester grades were reported. All students enrolled in four sections of Undergraduate Studies 10 in fall 2020 were invited to participate. Recruitment advertisements were posted on course management sites for each section and fellow instructors shared the opportunity during class announcements. A fellow instructor also asked me to attend their class session on Zoom (Zoom, 2021) to make a

brief announcement about participating in the research study. Of the 12 students who responded to the invitation, I invited 11 to participate via an email message. One respondent did not meet the sample criteria of identifying as a first-generation student or as a student of color. Seven students accepted the invitation and participated in both interviews for the study. All interviews were conducted using the Zoom web conferencing platform (Zoom, 2021). Participants had free Zoom accounts through the university (UC Merced OIT, 2021) and used them to access the majority of their class sessions, university events, and meetings with staff and faculty during the Fall 2020 Semester that was conducted entirely online. Participants self-selected whether to share their video camera during the interviews.

For each participant, I conducted two interviews between November 20, 2020 and December 22, 2020. First and second interviews were conducted about four weeks apart. Each interview was approximately 45 minutes in length. Participants were provided a $25 Amazon.com gift card as an incentive for participating in both interviews. Continued coding and analysis shaped the second interview; it focused on students' meanings and experiences of academic resilience as they concluded their first semester. Because the first year of college is when students become acculturated with new academic expectations, social environments and educational systems (Feldman, 2017; Greenfield et al., 2013; Upcraft et al., 2005; Woosley, 2003), understanding the conditions that foster resilience in a student's first semester is important. The second interview also allowed researcher to conduct member checks on initial findings. The timing of the first and second interviews encouraged reflection while also capturing resilience experiences continuously and in real-time during the critical first semester transition to college.

Data Sources

While narrative interviews were the main source of data, other data sources including an instructor survey and data from the 2020 New Student Survey, helped triangulate findings to enhance the trustworthiness and validity of my research. Rather than focusing on the performative aspect of academic resilience (e.g. grades), this study centered on how resilience experiences prompted self-reflection and adaptation in students' academic life. The data sources described in this section were also used to shape interview probes and enrich the data presented. Multiple data sources helped me "uncover the figure under the carpet" to explain the multilayered context of life (Edel, 1984 as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 73) and thicken the narratives generated. I saved coding stages as separate projects folders in Dedoose, a data analysis application (Dedoose, 2021) and wrote analytic memos after each cycle of analysis. These data sources were audit trails that added validity to the study by showing analysis pathways to my findings.

Narrative Interview

Given that resilience was situated as a dynamic process in this study, understanding the ways in which participants construct and express meaning was vitally important. The narrative interview offered an "internally consistent interpretation of understood past, experienced present, and anticipated future" (Cohler, 1982, p. 207) by study participants. An early leader of narrative techniques and analysis, Mishler (1986) advocated that interview processes foster discourse and storytelling. Mishler (1986) also shared that discourse may be suppressed by a rigid interview protocol that interrupts storytelling and does not account for the cultural, social, and personal contexts of participants. In the narrative interviews of this study, participants were invited to

"speak in their own voices, allowed to control the introduction and flow of topics, and encouraged to extend their responses" (Mishler, 1986, p. 69). Rather than acting as respondents to a set of interview questions, open-ended questions centered participants as story-tellers. As the researcher, I focused on listening and minimizing interruptions to create a comfortable environment for participants to share and describe experiences. I adopted the general framework of Fehér's (2011) narrative interview techniques with three components: 1) an introductory narrative question that orientated the participant to the focus of the interview and provided space to construct a story, 2) a narrative follow-up where participants were asked to elaborate on certain aspects of their story, 3) a second semi-structured interview to understand students' experiences of academic resilience at the end of the semester. To deepen these interviews, I drew upon field notes I created after each interview, member checks with participants, and analysis of Undergraduate Studies 10 classroom activities and outcomes.

Continued collaboration with the participants helped me negotiate the meaning of their stories. After initial in vivo coding and analysis of the first interviews, I wrote a brief story reflecting the participant's pre-college and college experiences. At the start of the second interview, I used these stories as part of the member checking process. The process helped the participant and I to reconnect, clarify misunderstandings, and provide a check on my biases as a researcher. Data collected from the first interview, field notes, and instructor survey helped to shape the questions for the second interview. Through these processes of validation, the researcher and participant both learned and changed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Information collected that was not connected to my research question or was only found in a single interview was omitted from the findings.

Data Sample

Individuals in this study were selected from among students who self-identify as a first-generation student of color and registered their interest in participating. They also were enrolled in Undergraduate Studies 10, a first-year seminar course at UC Merced. I used purposeful sampling to select information rich cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) for my study's seven participants. The number of participants is consistent with data collection recommendations for qualitative interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and this researcher's desire to collect data from students with a diversity of perspectives and experiences. While all students in the course were invited to participate, selected information-rich cases allowed for the greatest amount of learning and insight. All data collected was anonymized to protect participants. Participation was voluntary and communications from the researcher clearly stated involvement in the study would not influence grading in the pass or no pass Undergraduate Studies 10 course.

Selection of Information-Rich Cases

I used a screening script to collect applicant information and gain consent from participants. My criteria for selecting information-rich cases included self-identification as a first-generation student of color, participation in a first-year seminar course, and willingness and availability to be interviewed twice during the semester. Academic performance was not a criterion for participant selection given no official grades were recorded for these students at the time of selection. Additionally, participants were not selected using specific academic performance measures given the lack of correlation between academic performance measures and resilience (Cheng & Catling, 2015; Elizondo-Omaña, et al, 2010). Instead, this study

expanded on institutional performance outcomes through understanding academic resilience from intellectual, social, and emotional perspectives.

While not a requirement for participation, this researcher invited participants to draw upon other academic resilience protective processes outside of the course, such as UC Merced's mid-semester grade interventions. Unique among campuses in the University of California system, mid-semester grade interventions and reflective experiences (UC Merced Academic Advising, 2021) provided additional insights on students' perceptions of resilience and academic recovery. These activities also acted as protective processes in which participants leveraged when experiencing academic adversity.

Description of Participants

Seven participants were included in this study. I have used the pseudonyms of Arturo, Carmen, Jose, Leah, Paris, Rosa, and Santana to protect the identity of participants. All of the participants self-reported that they were first-generation Latina/o, enrolled in an Undergraduate Studies 10 course, and in their first-year of college. Three participants, Arturo, Jose, and Leah had siblings also attending college. Five participants identified as female, and two participants identified as male. Six participants self-identified as Latina/o and one participant identified as Latina and African-American. With limited access to campus housing due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Arturo, Paris, Rosa, Santana, and Leah lived at home with their families. Jose and Carmen lived on campus during their first semester. Participants are individually described in vignettes found in chapter four.

Data Analysis

To interpret the data collected, I adopted Creswell and Poth's (2018) Data Analysis Spiral. This process involved collecting and organizing data, reading and memoing emergent

ideas, describing and classifying codes into categories, developing and assessing interpretations, representing and visualizing the data, and creating an account of findings. Rather than moving through these processes in a linear fashion, the "general contour" (Creswell & Poth, 2018) of the spiral allowed flexibility and revision while moving around and through the analytic spirals of the model. In being flexible, yet explicit, in defining this process and outlining outcomes for each part of the coil, I was able exit the analysis spiral with narrative themes.

To organize the data, I recorded interviews and used an online service to produce transcripts. I created aliases for participant names and stored data securely in a password protected Box.com file. Contracted by the university, Box.com is a cloud-based storage software approved for confidential information with secure encryption during transit and in storage.

As transcripts were processed, I used a combination of reading and listening to address data gaps missed in the transcript. Then, I engaged in cycles of notetaking and reflection leading to the creation of brief field note summaries (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Scanning, reading, listening, and notetaking techniques allowed me to reflect, play, and explore as an initial dive into the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

First Interview Analysis

Because I wanted to honor each student's words as the most authentic and valid representations of their experiences, I used in vivo coding methods (Saldaña, 2016) for initial interviews. I coded each transcript by hand using Dedoose research software (Dedoose, 2020). I created separate project codebooks containing emergent codes and descriptions as a helpful reference to organize, reorganize, and track the evolution of my data analysis process (Saldaña, 2016). This detailed coding process resulted in over 500 codes. Following each interview, I looked for themes among the codes and grouped them into approximately 20 categories. I chose

not to combine or build upon codes as I processed each interview. Separately coding each transcript helped me to honor each student's unique contributions to the data. This process also helped me to avoid arriving at conclusions too early in my data analysis process. After in vivo coding each data set and reviewing the field notes, I drafted an analytic memo (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). The analytic memo recorded my initial processes, thoughts, ideas, and questions after interacting with the data during the coding process. Since the coding process continued over several weeks, analytic memos were helpful to review the data and continue analysis.

Second Interview Analysis

Much like the initial interviews, I spent considerable time reviewing and correcting errors within the follow-up interview transcripts. This process helped to deepen my understanding of participant experiences and the data corpus. Throughout listening and review processes, I again bolded important participant quotes and bracketed brief reflections creating analytic notes within the transcripts.

After consulting Saldaña's (2016) text, I decided to use process coding for the initial coding of second interviews. Process codes are action words that end with "ing" and align with current conceptualizations of resilience as dynamic, situational, and subject to supports in the environment (Henderson & Milstein, 1996; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Rutter, 1993; Southwick & Charney, 2018; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). The action focus of process coding also fit with how students experienced resilience in real-time during their first semester. Individual coding of each transcript helped me to recognize each participant's unique contributions while also allowing conclusions to emerge after initial data analysis stages. After process coding each second interview, I used Saldaña's (2016) recommendations to compare in vivo and process codes. The comparison process stimulated more vivid explanations of student experiences with

resilience and helped me develop initial axial categories. Initial categories contained a range of actions and reflected conceptual tensions or oppositions within each category (Charmaz, 2009).

Category Development

As I engaged in additional cycles of focused coding, attention given to silences, disruptions, contradictions, and peculiarities helped me expand the types of information I coded (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using Emerson's carpenter analogy, I "alternately chang[ed] the shape of the door and then the shape of the door frame to obtain a better fit" (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 173).

Writing additional analytic memos helped me to identify and interpret metaphors and biases, add layers of meaning to the data analysis, and assist with labeling code categories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used constant comparison (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to reveal similarities and differences in data segments and then to organize similar dimensions into a named category. Given the narrative nature of my study, these codes were short phrases or storytelling elements rather than single words.

To create final axial categories, I used an iterative mapping process (Brown, 1999) moving from a full set of codes, to creating a condensed list of categories and then organizing final axial categories. In using my research questions as a framework to develop axial categories, I engaged in a process of synthesis and classification of codes "on the basis of topics that have been identified as being of particular interest" (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 172). I again reviewed analytic memos from each processing stage to refresh my understanding of the data as I began to classify codes. As a step towards developing final axial categories, I circled back to the organization coil of the Data Analysis Spiral (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I reviewed the in vivo, process, and focused coding cycles and combined original codes into a single Dedoose project

(Dedoose, 2021). Viewing all of the codes in a single location was helpful to creating axial categories and experimenting with various category names to determine fit. As an initial categorizing technique, I organized code segments into axial categories that represent expected, surprising, and conceptually interesting information (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2004; Grbich, 2013). Core elements of my research question shaped the final axial categories entitled *Meanings of Resilience*, *Protective Processes* and *Resilience Experiences*. Key determining factors in grouping final axial categories were finding common descriptive elements and examples of the code in more than one data set (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used Dedoose analysis features (Dedoose, 2021) to test my axial codes for frequency and consistency across data sets. The axial categories resulting from the findings are discussed in chapter five.

Themes

Continuing the data analysis process allowed me to organize the categories of resilience meanings, processes and experiences into a new narrative framework of themes that Creswell and Poth (2018) called "restorying" (p. 72). This approach involved creating narrative segments or stories that combine the experiences of individual participants. I sorted the data several different ways to compare categories and examples before settling on the restorying elements (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As the restorying framework emerged, I sought to present it in a way that aligned with data collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The themes of *connecting*, *helping* and *storytelling* encompassed resilience meanings, processes, and experiences reflected in my research questions and category designations. They also communicated the dynamic and interconnected nature of resilience-building systems and individual habits. Themes are introduced in chapter five and discussed in chapter six.

As a creative application of the themes, I organized data in the form of a narrative poem. Initial versions of the poem were part of a process to succinctly capture the major themes of the study during the final cycles of data analysis. The final poem allowed me to restory (Creswell & Poth, 2018) research findings to capture the collective experiences and words of research participants in a creative expression of my narrative processes. The poem is included in chapter five.

Criteria for Trustworthiness

Just as quantitative researchers work to tune their instruments and techniques to ensure reliability, I have refined my human instrument (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Refining began through piloting my interview protocol, using constant comparison coding techniques, and conducting member checks during the data analysis process. I have enhanced trustworthiness through triangulation of multiple data sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1986), including an instructor survey and campus survey data. Data from the New Student Survey dashboard (IRDS, 2021) and University of California Undergraduate Experience dashboard (UCUES, 2021) allowed me to test my findings and develop a more holistic understanding of first-year, first-generation Latina/o students at UC Merced.

The instructor survey guided the formation of my second interview questions. Information collected helped validate that reflective writing exercises were part of all participants' experiences in the course. Reflection experiences were noted by participants as an important part of resilience habit formation. Learning more about the reflection activities and terminologies used in each course helped me frame the second interview questions to explore these experiences with participants.

As the researcher, my positionality within this study played a critical role. As an instructor of the course, I was able to recruit participants from multiple course sections. Throughout the research process, I kept field notes as a way to reflect on how my researcher role and practices intersect and influence student resilience experiences. The field notes were my interpretations of the relationship dynamics between myself and the story-tellers, impressions about how the participants viewed me, and examinations of the unconscious meanings and biases brought to the research process (Halloway & Jefferson, 2011). In addition, analytic memos written after each data analysis cycle provided an audit trail to crystalize, revise, and review how data was connected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

CHAPTER FOUR

PARTICIPANT VIGNETTES

I have composed brief vignettes to illuminate participants' distinctive lived experiences and to provide perspectives on how their unique stories have influenced the themes of this study. In creating these vignettes, I used my field note observations to reflect the setting and my interpretations of the relationship dynamics between myself and participants. This is so the reader "can develop a vicarious experience to get a feel for the time and place of the study" (Creswell & Poth, p. 246). Participants chose whether to use their video camera or background photos during the interviews on Zoom (Zoom, 2021). Because I was not able to make similar physical observations for each participant, I decided to omit this information from the vignettes.

All seven participants identified as first generation and Latina/o and were in their first semester at University of California, Merced. Five female and two male participants are listed in alphabetical order. All data collected was anonymized and I have used the pseudonyms of Arturo, Carmen, Jose, Leah, Paris, Rosa and Santana to protect the identity of participants.

Arturo

Arturo, a first-generation Latino from Southern California, was considering majors in English or natural sciences. He was living at home during his first semester of college due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Arturo shared his camera during both interviews on Zoom (Zoom, 2021). A number of teachers from high school and college made a significant impact on Arturo. Through books and leadership opportunities, teachers helped him see a world beyond his current environment. Also, a high school leadership camp had a profound influence on Arturo embracing his extroverted personality. Arturo also shared that a positive relationship with his family and Latino culture supported his resilience. He discussed the importance of his relationship with his

father who expressed a consistent curiosity about what he was learning in school. Inheriting this quality from his dad, he wanted to use it to help others learn through a career in teaching. Arturo mentioned he enjoyed showing appreciation to his peers and teachers. It fueled his motivation and resilience through feeling "more grounded" and connected in the college environment. Feeling grounded and connected was a key aspect of building resilience for Arturo. Rather than just making acquaintances, he expressed a strong desire to have deeper relationships with college peers. This has been a struggle with online learning during COVID-19, so Arturo has tried to be more direct with friend requests. Saying "I think you are cool, and I'd like to be friends with you." it felt a bit "weird and uncomfortable" to do online but he shared that people have been receptive to it. In feeling slightly embarrassed by his boldness, Arturo said he would rather be a bit uncomfortable than miss out on a friendship. In addition, he created and joined several study groups where he received and provided help to his peers; however, he wished more people would participate in these groups and in his classes. Despite some challenges with procrastination, Arturo was pleased with finishing his first semester with all A and B grades.

Carmen

From Southern California, Carmen is a first-generation Latina majoring in physics. She selected to live on campus during her first semester. Carmen was beginning to think about changing her major to political science to prepare for a law career. Carmen used her camera for both of our interviews on Zoom (Zoom, 2021). She was quiet at first and I often followed my initial questions with additional probes. While her sharing was concise, she revealed a significant depth of understanding about herself and interactions in her new college community. As a creative person, she proposed an original final exam for her college honors physics course and designed handmade activity sheets for children in a local hospital. During our second interview,

she shared one of her hand-drawn activity sheets. Despite the isolation she felt living on campus, she found community in her leadership living learning community, involvement in several clubs, and peer and faculty connections related to her physics class. Her family, and in particular her mom, provided support and a model of resilience. Carmen saw the resilience of her family as interconnected with the hard work ethic of her Hispanic ancestors and culture. She was relieved by her mid-semester grades but also worried about how to avoid a "take it easy" mentality for the rest of the semester. At the end of the semester, she was expecting to "end on a good note" by finishing with passing grades in all of her courses.

Jose

A first-generation Latino male, Jose hails from Southern California. He was reserved in manner at first but also clear and concise in sharing his experiences. Majoring in mechanical engineering, Jose credited his siblings for helping him be more focused on his higher education goals. Both of his siblings were also attending college and modeled academic success behaviors that Jose wanted to emulate. After following their pathways throughout high school, moving away for college helped him develop ownership of his goals and an ability to push through challenges. Jose chose to live his first semester on campus. Despite feeling a bit isolated and lost at times, living in the residence hall helped him develop a stronger sense of independence. He was "shocked and embarrassed" by his chemistry failing grade at mid-semester but also said it was the "wake-up call" he needed. Talking to instructors about their own experiences in overcoming failure was helpful to building the resilience that fueled his academic recovery. Awareness of his own limitations, when he needs to ask for help, and how to include practice sessions in his studying, helped him to regulate his self-described "over confidence." His living learning community of peers with similar Latina/o backgrounds was a form of support in which

he both contributed and benefited. At the end of the semester, he felt quite satisfied about his academic recovery and finished with all As and one B grade.

Leah

Hailing from the Bay Area of California, Leah is a first-generation Latina with an undeclared major. She did not share her camera during either interview on Zoom (Zoom, 2021). During her first semester, Leah was living in the Bay Area with her sister who was enrolled in community college and has a baby boy. Leah's family was relocating to Sacramento, so while attending school she was helping her sister with the apartment. At the start of school year, she also began a 30 hour-per-week job at Walmart but ended the position after mid-semester because the work hours combined with school was too intense. Her family was a key support, providing financial assistance as well as the physical and mental "space" she needed. One example of physical support was the used desk she received from her sister. She was so grateful that she would no longer have to do her school work on the floor of their apartment! After visiting UC Merced, Leah "felt as if I belong" making it her first choice. Despite not living on campus, she described her leadership living learning community as making her feel very welcome at UC Merced. Leah noted that the close virtual relationships within the group felt the same as her in-person friendships. She signed up for the leadership living learning community because of the service-focused activities. She enjoyed community service in high school and wanted to continue helping others as a college student. Before the first interview, Leah was curious about the word resilience and Googled it. Leah originally thought of resilience as continuously accomplishing tasks no matter what the obstacles. As the semester continued, she modified her understanding to include time for reflective experiences so she could adjust and adapt more successfully. While

her first semester had academic ups and downs, Leah believed time management skills and reflecting on experiences would help her to be more successful and happier next semester.

Paris

From Southern California, Paris identified as a first-generation, African American/Black, and Latina student. She was unsure about her major choice. This student did not show her camera for either interview but had a profile picture on Zoom visible (Zoom, 2021). I sensed a reluctance to share, especially early in the interviews. For example, she shared that her parents were not present during her growing up years but did not want to discuss it further. She also used the phrase "I am not quite sure" often even after I rephrased questions. Paris was struggling in her classes and shared that it takes her a while to make friends and get used to her environment. A strong dislike for asking for help was expressed as she was concerned that these requests would not be received positively. Growing up, several people described her as resilient due to her life circumstances, but she did not understand what resilience meant until participating in this study. For Paris, resilience was a form of survival.

The support of teachers, who engaged her in after school activities and gave her books, also provided her with encouragement to apply to college. Despite not living on campus, Paris was part of the leadership learning community. Her peer connections at UC Merced were limited to a friend who was from her high school. During our second interview, Paris shared that she was continuing to struggle in some of her classes. In thinking about this semester as a "test run", she was hopeful about doing better next semester.

Rosa

A first-generation Latina from Southern California, Rosa described herself as a pre-med student considering either anthropology or public health as her major. She selected to live at

home during her first semester. Her video camera was off for both interviews on Zoom but a profile picture of herself was visible (Zoom, 2021). Throughout both interviews, she spent considerable time talking about grades and her goal of going to medical school. Rosa was very proud of the educational opportunities she was afforded at her international baccalaureate high school. While she did not earn international credit, she took AP courses, joined AVID, and participated in after-school academic support programs. Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) is non-profit career and college readiness program found in 7500 schools (AVID, 2021). She credited her "AVID family", a close group of friends and teachers in the program with helping her chart a positive pathway towards college. Rosa shared that many of her friends outside of AVID did not complete high school or attend college. College support programs also provided Rosa with simulations and tools that helped her become familiar with college expectations. In college, these experiences helped her display resilience by relaxing and focusing instead of being stressed about large assignments. Rosa mentioned "getting things done" as a sign of independence and confidence in herself. She learned these qualities from her mom who often shared "you start life alone and end life alone." You need to rely on yourself in life." Being a "very shy person" she found it difficult to feel comfortable connecting online and has not made any friends at the university. Rosa expected to finish the semester with all A and B grades.

Santana

Santana is a first-generation Latina from Southern California who is exploring choices for a major. This student communicated eagerness to participate in the study starting with our email communications before the interview. She also had an interest in the interview process as she

could see herself being a researcher someday. Santana had her video camera on for both interviews on Zoom (Zoom, 2021). She was living at home during her first semester.

Throughout the interviews, Santana expressed many interests, including trying musical instruments, listening to a variety of music, learning languages, playing video games, and joining university student clubs. She shared her dreams of speaking to large audiences and playing in a band on stage. During the first interview, she volunteered to a play a few lines of Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" on her Ukulele and I obliged. A self-described "social butterfly", Santana loved to talk. She expressed frustration about the lack of opportunities to connect with peers in class and the follow-through of students on group projects. If a peer was not sharing their video, Santana would ask about their posted profile picture on Zoom (Zoom, 2021) and offer a complement or try to connect it with one of her interests. While she was not aware of it at first, the Zoom "raise hand" feature became a favorite; it allowed her to more confidently participate in class. Reaching out and communicating with her peers and professors also helped her navigate group project experiences when some team members failed to participate. Santana shared that resilience meant having the goal, ambition, and desire to overcome challenges. Defining herself as a "work in progress" she had several non-passing grades at mid-semester and opted to take them pass/no pass. The pass/no pass option was a new offering by the university to support students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since making that decision, she had recovered with a B grade in one of the classes.

Summary

Participants were interviewed between November and December 2020 during their first semester of college. Through two narrative interviews, participants shared their meanings of, processes and experiences associated with resilience. They reflected on their resilience-building

experiences in real-time during the critical first stage of college, commented on unexpected shifts to remote learning, and explained their learning challenges with the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants' backgrounds and stories have added richness and depth to the findings presented in chapter five.

CHAPTER FIVE

FINDINGS

Introduction

The findings of this study resulted from analysis of narrative interviews along with program, campus, and UC system survey data that added validity to the results. Multiple interviews provided rich insights into how students were experiencing academic resilience in real-time during their first semester. The first set of interviews occurred after the midpoint of the Fall 2020 Semester. A follow up interview was scheduled at the end of the semester which allowed for collection of additional insights as well as clarified initial findings through member checks. To reflect narrative processes, I created interview questions that encouraged descriptive responses and member check vignettes that summarized initial college experiences.

The findings presented in this chapter are a result of an extensive analysis process that involved listening and creating field notes of interview transcripts as well as cycles of in vivo, process, and focused coding. Using the Data Analysis Spiral model (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and creating a series of analytic memos helped me to document, track, and reflect on the data and analysis process. As a way to test my analysis of the data, I used code application and presence functions in Dedoose (Dedoose, 2021) to compare my codes with those generated by the research software. This analysis process allowed for flexibility and revision while also providing multiple ways of validating the findings.

My research questions guided protocols for initial and follow up interviews, analysis categories, and presentation of the findings.

1. How do first-year first-generation Latina/o college students make meaning of and experience academic resilience?

a. What are the protective processes students leverage when faced with academic adversity?
b. In what ways may students display or express academic resilience when navigating mid-semester interventions?

To present my findings and answer my research questions, I have organized this chapter into three sections: *Meanings of Academic Resilience, Protective Processes* and *Resilience Experiences*. *Meanings of Academic Resilience* answers the central research question of this study by sharing student's meanings and conceptualizations of resilience. *Protective Processes* details the supports participants used to build resilience. The final section of this chapter, *Resilience Experiences,* contains findings about student experiences, displays, and expressions of resilience between the midpoint and the end of student's first semester. These sections also reflect the final categories developed through the data analysis process.

To begin, I have contextualized the interconnected nature of resilience meanings, processes, and experiences of this study by organizing the categories into three themes: *connecting, helping,* and *storytelling*. In introducing the themes along with corresponding data from UC Merced's New Student Survey (2021), I have explored the convergence of data sources to offer a more comprehensive understanding of resilience in first-generation Latina/o students. I have highlighted data encompassing all students of color, including Latina/o students, to give a broader context to the experiences of students with diverse backgrounds and to briefly illuminate their common and divergent experiences. The term *students of color* is primarily defined as a race or ethnicity other than White (Mootoo, 2020). For this study, I used ethnicity breakout parameters in the New Student Survey dashboard (IRDS, 2021) that allowed students to identify

as African-American/Black, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, Native American/Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander or more than one of these ethnicities.

The themes encompass the findings but also reflect the reciprocating relationships between categories that activate resilience. In chapter six, I discuss the themes and their applications in the higher education context.

Overview of Themes

Three major themes summarize how students make meaning and experience academic resilience, engage in protective processes, and navigate mid-semester adversities and interventions. The themes also connect this study's meanings, supports, and expressions of resilience into a new narrative framework that reflects the academic journeys of the participants. Responding, corresponding, and harmonizing actions between the themes create reciprocating relationships that further activate resilience. The action-orientated themes of *connecting*, *helping*, and *storytelling* also communicate the dynamic, situational, and process orientation of academic resilience that was shared by participants.

Connecting

The first theme, connecting, reflects associations with resources, family, peers, faculty, and the campus environment. It also reflects a spectrum of experiences including isolation, emerging connections, and hope for additional connections. Connections led to a sense of belonging, a major contributor to student success and resilience among first-generation students of color (Benson & Lee, 2020; Southwick & Charney, 2018; Strayhorn, 2019).

An analysis of selected questions from the New Student Survey (IRDS, 2021) indicates significant changes occurred with how welcome and connected students felt in the campus environment during their first semester. At the beginning of the term, nearly 96% of first-

generation students of color said they felt connected. By the end of the term, just over 50% of students felt connected and welcome. At the end of the term, students of color, including Latina/o students, felt slightly more connected (59%) than White students (51%), with African-American students feeling the highest level of connection (62%). First-generation students indicated they felt more connected at the end of the semester (59%) compared to non-first-generation students (55%). More female students felt connected (60%) than their male peers (56%) at the end of the term. Participation in UC Merced's African-American and Black living learning community may be a contributing factor to this population of students feeling more connected than their peers.

While first-generation Latina/o students felt more connected that their White non-first-generation peers at the end of the term, this data indicates that significant levels of disconnection remains. The findings of this study echo these concerns but also provide examples of resilience-building experiences and processes that students used to create connections.

A lack of connections also impacted students' concerns about learning online. 61% of first-year students surveyed indicated they were concerned about learning effectively in the remote environment (IRDS, 2021). Even though *connection* is not directly referenced in the survey question, students in this study provided examples of how connections impacted their remote learning experience. At the end of the semester, Rosa was one of three participants that shared that she had not talked to anyone in her classes because of the online environment.

> I'm usually a very shy person to begin with--I don't talk to anyone. So, being online and not being next anyone, I kind of just, like, go to class. I stay quiet, don't turn on my camera and just kind of stay there.

Male students were slightly more concerned about online learning (63%) compared to female students (60%) (IRDS, 2021). First-generation students were more concerned about learning remotely (62%) compared to their non-first-generation peers (58%) (IRDS, 2021). . Between 59% and 64% of students of color (except for African-American students), were concerned about learning effectively online compared to 51% of White students (IRDS, 2021). African-American students shared concern levels similar to that of White students. Latina/o students expressed the highest level of concern, with 64% reporting that they were concerned or very concerned (IRDS, 2021). High levels of concern about online learning indicate the need to understand what contributes to conditions for academic success. Overall, these data indicate that first-generation students of color were more concerned about being successful in the online environment compared to White non-first-generation students.

The data highlighted from survey questions combined with the experiences of students in this study indicate that connection is a key factor in academic success. In chapter six, I discuss ways in which the university may implement changes in policies and programs to foster connections.

Helping

The second theme, helping, reflects findings associated with help-seeking and help-giving behaviors that involved peers, faculty, and their communities. Both seeking and providing help assisted students with feeling more connected to the campus and more able to manage the challenges of college. A similar helping dynamic was reflected in Walton & Cohen's (2011) research on college academic interventions. Among diverse populations, they found that resilience habits are fostered when participants see themselves as "benefactors and not just beneficiaries" of help (Walton & Cohen, 2011, p. 1448).

Since help-seeking behaviors were important protective processes in this study's findings, I triangulated my conclusions with New Student Survey data on the helpfulness of instructors and teaching assistants in students' transition experiences (IRDS, 2021). Research indicates that students are more likely to request help from people they are already trust (Morales, 2012). This survey question lists office hours and appointments as examples of transition support resources; these examples were also frequently cited as support processes by participants in this study. First-generation and non-first-generation students found instructors to be helpful at similar percentages (67% and 68%, respectively) (IRDS, 2021). 20% of males indicated they did not use faculty or teacher assistant resources compared to 13% of female students (IRDS, 2021). 15% of the Latina/o students who participated in the survey did not use this resource compared to 23% among White students (IRDS, 2021).

While these data suggests that help-seeking behavior is more likely for female students of color, a significant percentage of students are not utilizing faculty as a resource to support their transition and resilience. Student examples and experiences referenced in this study provide additional insights into students' thinking and behaviors associated with help-seeking.

Storytelling

Storytelling is the third major theme of this study. In brief narrative forms, participants shared realizations about themselves and how they managed changes and challenges. Self-awareness was a key component of their narrative. In discussing mid-semester grades, participants were relieved that their performance reflected progress towards their academic goals. At the same time, they worried about staying on track and avoiding behaviors not aligned with their objectives. Self-awareness along with the related concepts of self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-concept have been shown to be common dispositional factors of students who display

resilience (Maholmes, 2014: Morales & Trotman, 2004). The self-awareness component of a student's narrative served as a metacognitive strategy that initiated reflection on their past, present, and future self (Southwick & Charney, 2018).

I triangulated the self-awareness dimension of the resilience narrative finding with data collected from the New Student Survey (IRDS, 2021) about GPA expectations and efficacy regarding grades. 60% of first-generation students thought they would be satisfied by their first semester grades compared to 65% among their non-first-generation counterparts (IRDS, 2021). Comparing students of color, including Latina/o students, with White students indicated similar GPA expectations, with nearly 70% stating that they were somewhat or very likely to be satisfied (IRDS, 2021). Male students' satisfaction about anticipated grades (64%) was 6% higher than females (58%) (IRDS, 2021). This data indicates that over 30% of the surveyed first-generation Latina/o students do not expect to be satisfied with their grades at the end of their first semester (IRDS, 2021).

In sharing their expectations about doing well in their most difficult course, 73% of both non-first-generation and first-generation students were confident in doing well (IRDS, 2021). Male students were slightly more confident (75%) in doing well than female students (72%) (IRDS, 2021). 76% of White students reported they were sure or very sure about doing well compared to 73% of Latina/o students (IRDS, 2021). African-American students (82%) reported the highest expectations among ethnic groups (IRDS, 2021). To summarize, nearly 25% of the surveyed first-generation students of color do not expect to be satisfied with their first semester academic performance (IRDS, 2021). New Student Survey data and the findings of this study indicate the need for additional supports to help students feel confident and competent in their academic endeavors (IRDS, 2021). The meanings, processes, and experiences told through the

students' narratives in this study provide a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to self-efficacy in academic endeavors.

In introducing the themes and connecting them with additional data sources, I have added validity to the explanation of the findings. By focusing on meanings, processes, and experiences of resilience, I will explore the findings as they relate to the research questions in the next section of this chapter. Data presented in the following sections are from interviews conducted between November and December of 2020.

Meanings of Academic Resilience

In both the first and follow-up interviews, students were asked about their meanings and conceptualizations of academic resilience and how it may have changed during the semester. Connection to their environment, not fearing failure, self-efficacy and agency, and survival, captures the variety of meanings shared by participants. I have presented these findings in alphabetical order. Students' meanings of resilience have also shaped their experiences; they are explored in the *Resilience Experiences* section of this chapter.

Connection to Place and Environment

Being grounded and comfortable in a place was an important meaning participants associated with academic resilience. Participants described that feeling grounded and comfortable in college came from connections with people, programs, and resources. Arturo described being grounded as feeling connected and part of something important.

> So, it's having a connection to the place or to the people I'm working with. Getting to know where I am--that's really important for me. [It] adds to the importance of what I'm doing there. Like, it kind of reminds me, oh, this is like a great place and I like the

> programs here. I like the people here. And you know, they're working to help me and they're working to better themselves, so I want to be a part of that.

Others described that a connection to a place was an essential first step to academic resilience and ultimately, thriving, as Paris described: “I have to get used to my environment first before I feel like I can really thrive in that environment, you know, that's how it is wherever I go.” Others described the feelings of isolation that inhibit developing comfortability in a place. Jose compared living in the dorms with living at home.

> I’m used to a house with a lot of people in there--talking to me or helping me. But in the dorms where everybody is isolated, it felt like now I'm going to struggle with things because I don't really have that helping hand in front of me to tell me things.

Leah felt it was difficult to describe the meaning of resilience but shared “I felt like I belong.” Carmen associated connection with feeling welcome “I enjoy my physics class, despite the work, because everyone in there is very kind and understanding.”

Not Fearing Failure

Failure played a role in the participants’ understanding of resilience. Rather than fearing or retreating from failure, participants realized failing was a challenge to be tackled. “If you see an obstacle you don't try to run away from it. Try to find a way around it or through it”, Carmen described. Santana described moving from a fear of failure to realizing failing was a step towards success: “I was afraid to fail. But I noticed that in order to succeed, we had to fail a couple of times.” Another student, Jose, reflected that failure is a common experience and is not a measure of one’s capabilities. “Failure isn't something necessarily, like, a measurement of your intelligence. It's more of something that you learn from and something that happens to almost everyone at some point in their life.”

“Give it your all. Don't be afraid to fail. Even if we fail--you all could still prove yourself the next time. Right now, just try your best.” Leah remembered this quote as part of a motivation speech given by one of her professors. It became part of her own meaning of resilience. Her professor’s acknowledgement of failure as part of a process rather than an end point made Leah feel “like I have someone there for me…Although I have my parents, I felt like I had more support from my professors, especially.” Leah began to realize that not fearing failure was part of the campus ethnos that acknowledges challenges while also providing encouraging support.

Self-efficacy and Agency

Self-efficacy and agency, a belief in one’s abilities along with the coordinating skills to effectively accomplish a task, were frequently associated with meanings of resilience. UC Merced has embraced connections between resilience, self-efficacy, and agency as part of the *Self-Awareness* Hallmark of the Baccalaureate Degree (UC Merced Hallmarks, 2019). While the relationship between self-efficacy and resilience needs further exploration, “resilient efficacy” (Bandura, 2008, p. 2) and “mediated efficacy” (Camfield, 2008, p. 2) embrace the complementary and intersecting nature of these concepts to best support students. Participants described self-efficacy by using terms such as “pushing through unknowns” (Rosa), “climbing out of failure” (Jose) and “doing my best” (Carmen). For some participants, development of self-efficacy was encouraged by others through modeling (Bandura, 2008; Camfield, 2016). Carmen mentioned her mom’s influence on her self-efficacy.

> …ever since I was like a child she was like, oh, you know, I want [you] to study hard like get good grades, you know. If you don't get them, it's fine…I won’t get mad, just try your hardest. So, that mentality, kind of like, helped me to try to do my best. I wasn't forced to

> get good results but kind of [was] encouraged to do them. I have friends whose parents are very strict and expected them to get straight As.

In communicating agency, students reflected on making the most of opportunities even when the situation was not ideal. They shared that agency meant taking things "step by step" and "finding other approaches to the same problem" (Jose), "looking for solutions" (Arturo) and "work[ing] hard" (Carmen) to "stick with it" (Santana). Jose communicated a sense of opportunity, urgency, and focus within this excerpt:

> Because no matter what happens, no matter what type of circumstances…Specifically this semester, with COVID and all the things that are going on—you have to be able to push yourself. Because you can't put an excuse if you're been given the opportunity to do something. Even if you don't have all the necessary resources, or you're not necessarily put in the best position, you still have to make something out of it.

Confidence in his ability to be persistent allowed Jose to use problem-solving skills to creatively navigate academic challenges even when the situation was not ideal.

While participants communicated the presence of efficacy and agency in their resilience journeys, how students develop efficacy is a direction for further research. Camfield (2006) posits that personal efficacy and agency "arises in tandem with forging stronger, not weaker ties with other people" through modeling and feedback (p. 9). The harmonizing effects of individual and community contributions to resilience are further discussed in chapter six.

Survival

As defined by participants, survival is doing what is needed to get through a given circumstance. In describing the difficult circumstances of her early life, Paris associated survival with resilience.

> It's funny that you bring up resilience. Because as a kid, and especially the way I grew up, people were like, wow, you're very resilient…I used to never know, like, what it meant. I'm just like, What do you mean I'm resilient? I just do what I have to do…It's kind of like a form of survival, I guess.

While only one participant used the word "survival" (Paris), others used phrasing that communicated survival such as "finding ways not to drown myself in the work" (Rosa). Leah discussed being too busy to process past challenges. "I don't really have the time to process it, or like, go over it. I have to get started on my next thing right away… I don't remember what we learned in the past weeks."

As seen from these examples, resilience as a form of survival provided a way to cope with challenges, but it also presented risks to participants' academic success and overall well-being.

In describing their meanings of academic resilience, participants shared that resilience was not an end goal but a dynamic process that helped them navigate through challenges. Whether it was associated with coping, confidence, connection to a place, or overcoming a fear, participants suggested resilience was a means to reaching successful outcomes. In reflecting on his first semester, Arturo summarized the dynamic orientation of resilience. "There's a spectrum…at the end there's thriving. And, then there's good--I'm doing good. I think I'm in the middle."

Protective Processes

This study aligns with compensatory resilience theory models in situating protective supports as a critical component of resilience behaviors (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Compensatory models focus on the reduction of adversity through protective processes (Zolkoski

& Bullock, 2012). Processes, rather than factors, reflect the dynamic systems needed to support resilience (Rutter, 1993). While protective processes noted by research participants are presented here, the outcomes of these supports can differ based on circumstances and variations in people. The layered influences of personal, situational, and environmental factors is consistent with research on protective processes (Rutter. 1987, 1993). While each process is discussed individually, it is the intersecting and overlapping nature of processes that helped students navigate adversity.

Family

The findings of this study point to parents and siblings as important supports. Participants indicated that parents contributed to their academic resilience through their examples of hard work along with emotional, motivational, and financial support. Siblings provided academic, emotional, and physical support according to participants. The types of support siblings and parents provided were similar, so they have been included together in this subcategory. Participants referenced examples in their family as they considered their own goals. For instance, Jose described different educational pathways of family members and compared them to his plans. Modeling of family members helped him envision his life both with and without higher education. In doing so, he was able to see the pathway he needed to take to advance his goals.

> I guess I see the flip side of the coin. Because most of my family--outside of like my immediate family--like aunts, uncles, cousins--they didn't really have higher education or didn’t pursue higher education. And in that, [I] compared [it] to my immediate family with my sister and my brother pursuing higher education. I know that I want to follow that path because I don't want to end up essentially in the same place that my parents were at. So, being able to see both sides of it and seeing the outcomes and the

> consequences of both of the actions, it led me to believe that I have to do this because it will lead to a better future for me.

While he wanted to avoid some of the hardships and struggles experienced by his parents, he was inspired by and sought to model their ability to sacrifice and work hard to succeed.

Another dimension of support mentioned by participants was a family member's curiosity about the world and genuine interest in what they were doing in school. Arturo shared how admiration of his dad influenced his education.

> I've always admired in him—his openness. He has a lot of importance for education …even if it's not through an institution--just learning more about the world and being curious. I started to reflect the same feeling of curiosity and importance of education. He would be interested in what I would be doing in school and he would just ask me about it.

His dad's curiosity and interest in what he was learning was a form of care in his home environment. He leveraged this form of familial capital (Yosso, 2005) to succeed in his academic goals. Arturo continued by sharing that his father's interest helped him learn material but also made him "feel good, like on the inside. Oh, he actually like cares what I'm learning about." Jose also described the emotional support of his mom as a form of care, presence, and motivation while away from home.

> Sort of just like an emotional support, always calling me making sure I was okay when I was dorming. It just helps a lot that someone cares about you and someone is checking up on you. It just gives you that motivation to just keep going because you know you're doing it for your family and also for yourself.

The emotional support of his mom was a form of familial capital (Yosso, 2005) that Jose used to combat isolation and to keep moving towards his goals. While examples and emotional

encouragement were common protective processes noted by participants, physical examples of support were also shared. Leah described the physical support of space.

> They're giving me the space I need to work. They helped my sister get a desk for me so I could do my work because they mainly saw me on the ground doing my work. And that was really a struggle, so having this desk is really a bonus.

Whether biological or chosen, families provided support during an important life transition.

Learning Communities

The learning communities subcategory describes participation in camps, classrooms, peer groups, and living learning communities. Through a sense of welcome, academic support, or family-like atmosphere, learning communities provided support to participants. Research also indicates that learning communities are important contributors to academic skill development and sense of belonging (Kuh et al., 2008; Skipper, 2017). Pre-college learning communities such as leadership camps and AVID (AVID, 2021) were important ways students developed self-confidence, college skills, and resilience habits. In describing her "AVID family" (peers) and "AVID mom" (teacher), Rosa experienced strong support with family-like values that modeled high goals and expectations for academic success.

Living learning communities available through educational opportunity and leadership programs provided important connections for students with similar backgrounds and interests. Jose reflected on his Hispanic and first-generation background which he shared with his peers enrolled in his living learning community.

> In a sense, [they're] in the same place that I was in, so they understand my situation and they were able to really just help me out…having someone that can [say] I'm struggling through the same things that you are struggling with, and we can all do it together.

In talking about her experience in the leadership themed living learning community, Leah discussed how it reduced connection barriers.

> Even though we're online and not in person, it seems like I met them in person. It has that vibe...like, everybody's chill with each other. Everybody knows each other, like if we knew each other in person.

In expressing that "everyone knows each other" (Leah) and we "can all do it together" (Jose), participants shared that learning communities provided important connections and emphasized collective action toward shared goals. Common backgrounds, goals, and interests among participants in these communities created an environment of reciprocating relationships where students both engaged in modeling and became models for others. The higher levels of connectedness reported among African-American students may have been influenced by their participation in an African-American/Black themed living learning community. Therefore, additional research to understand the connection between Latina/o identity-focused learning communities and student success is warranted.

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness was a key protective process participants used to navigate through challenges. This subcategory reflects students' realizations about themselves and how they used this knowledge to manage changes and challenges. For many participants, their self-awareness came about through reflective and narrative activities. Carmen reflected that despite being "really good at" science she wasn't interested in it as deeply as she thought. Self-awareness about her interests spurred her to rethink her physics major and investigate other interest areas by joining student organizations. Carmen shared, "I'm like branching out into other topics I find interesting. So, for instance, I joined Model [United Nations] and I really enjoy it. So I was

thinking maybe I'll do political science next semester." Instead of continuing in a major she did not enjoy, awareness of her interests acted as a protective process. It motivated her to join organizations that helped her consider new academic choices. Future studies could more deeply probe how and where self-awareness originated among participants.

Participants associated self-awareness with a personal confidence that helped them connect with others. Through a high school camp experience, Arturo had a realization about an aspect of his personality that was hidden by insecurities.

> One of the themes of that experience was kind of accepting insecurities and getting over them. So, for me, it was about reaching out to other people, connecting with them and being more sociable…I would categorize myself as introverted before [the camp experience] and as extroverted after that. But I do know that [being] extroverted has been my personality the whole time, but it's been locked away by insecurities.

In realizing he was an extroverted person, he more actively sought opportunities to connect with others in high school in college. Self-awareness about his true personality helped him boldly make friend requests and form study groups, despite the difficulties of connecting in the online learning environment.

For Jose, self-awareness connected directly with his ability to be resilient.

> I believe that I'm very resilient. In that sense, I'm not going to give up on something simply because I find it difficult at first…Not everything comes quickly, and I can't try to cram everything into one day. So being able to be self-aware about my own limitations in my capabilities.

Along with awareness of his skills and limitations, Jose understood persistence was an important personal value. These realizations supported his efforts to routinely attend office hours and create

practice test questions, helping him to change his mid-semester failing grade in chemistry into a B grade.

Santana displayed self-awareness through expression of a wide variety of interests, including languages, video games, and music. While still trying to find a place and focus for them in college, she used her interests to connect with her new UC Merced community. After playing a few lines of Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" on her ukulele during our interview, she shared that she uses her wide variety of interests to combat isolation and build friendships in her online courses.

> I can relate to people in some way. So that's how I started my conversations. I asked him, What do you watch? What kind of music do you like?...And eventually, somehow we hit a point where we relate to something and then we eventually talk. And that's how my friendship starts.

For Rosa, self-awareness made her more aware of her environment. She shared a high school experience of being in an all-White chemistry class.

> I went from being in all-Brown classroom to being in an all-White classroom. And that was a big culture shock as well. And it was a lot more work than I was used to. And I think I just kind of found a rhythm to it. And I found that I needed to get help from the teachers. So I would spend a lot of lunchtimes in [my teacher's] classroom getting help.

Her self-awareness about her surroundings helped her to adapt, moving from "shock" to a new "rhythm" of finding help outside of class.

Self-awareness helped participants understand their environments, social interactions, and the personal strengths they used in navigating adversity and displaying resilience. Students used

their awareness to adapt the ways in which they interacted in the campus environment. Findings about these interactions will be shared in the *Resilience Experiences* section of this chapter.

Teachers

Professors and teachers also were noted as protective processes among all participants. Participants said faculty encouraged and challenged them in ways that helped them realize things about themselves. They did this by providing books, encouraging them to pursue leadership opportunities, and urging them to take challenging classes. They also offered constructive and challenging feedback when participants were off course. In college, participants shared that faculty who created a supportive learning environment helped them overcome academic challenges. Professors created this environment, in part, through their availability and personal stories about how they navigated academic challenges. Carmen's remembrance of a conversation about her major choice illustrates the importance of faculty presence and storytelling.

> [My professor] hasn't really told me to see on one path. She said to keep my options open. Then she shared her story too….In her senior year of college, she took an art class. She was like, oh, what if I would have taken that class earlier? I would have probably gotten a minor in art and probably would have done other things.

After receiving a failing mid-semester grade, Jose found his instructor's story of failure helpful to beginning his academic recovery.

> [My instructor] went into college--he never really expected himself to, in a way, fail. I felt the same about myself because I always, you know, I never really felt that sort of difficulty in things.

In thinking about how his instructor overcame adversity to find success, Jose felt reassured in the course corrections he was making. "I was in the right path and I was doing the right things."

These findings provide further evidence that professors and teachers play key roles in modeling resilience and by creating a supportive school environment where trust is built and relationships thrive (Erickson, 1963; Henderson & Milstein, 1996; Werner & Smith, 1988).

Protective processes noted in this study have been documented by other researchers (Maholmes, 2014; Morales & Trotman, 2004). Consistent with other research, participants noted that protective processes are layered and work in concert with each other (Luther et al, 1993; Morales, 2010; Morales & Trotman, 2004; Ungar, 2013). The findings of this study give further evidence that first-generation Latina/o students often use a variety of protected processes due to the additional barriers they experience (Hurtado et al, 2015; Kitano, 1995). The findings from this study also expand these understandings by describing the experiences of first-generation Latina/o students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Family members, teachers, learning communities, and self-awareness provided internal and external guidance that helped students begin to model resilience dispositions and habits.

Resilience Experiences

Building upon the previous section's ways students define resilience, this section details the experiences, displays, and expressions of resilience in the academic life of first-year students. Given the situational nature of resilience and the need for more research on specific transitional experiences (Rutter, 1993; Super & Harkness, 1986; Werner, 1993), this study focuses on student experiences between the midpoint and end of students' first semester of college. While participants were asked about their prior educational experiences, these expressions were contextualized within the lens of their current transition to college. The real-time nature of these experiences allowed participants to share resilience understandings and actions as they navigated the mid-semester grade reporting interventions. In this way, it updates Morales' (2012) research

on first-generation students' navigation of their first semester. Students' early expressions of resilience offer current perspectives on emerging resilience habits in the midst of a global pandemic.

As mentioned previously, a shared intervention all UC Merced first-year students experience is receiving mid-semester grades. Since this was a universal experience for all participants, I have focused on students' expressions and displays of resilience starting at the time of this intervention. Mid-semester grade reporting is designed to help students reflect on academic successes and challenges and make positive course corrections for the remainder of the term. Students with a D or F in any class were required to undertake targeted interventions to assist them in their academic recovery. These included attending workshops, meeting with advisors, and developing goals. Two participants in this study indicated they participated in these formalized interventions. While not prompted to participate in a specific intervention, the remaining five participants all indicated that receiving mid-semester grades stimulated reflection experiences and expressions associated with resilience. Rather than assessing the effectiveness of the intervention on academic performance, I am focusing on the intervention as a point of reflection, change, or adaptation. While interventions are sometimes associated deficit model approaches, this term is commonly referenced and used in educational literature, including Walton & Wilson's (2018) review of 300 interventions. Participants in this study did not perceive the mid-semester grade report intervention in a negative way. This may be due to the universal nature of grade reporting at mid-semester for all first-year students.

In focusing on the "display" and "express" words in my question, the categories of helping, hoping actively, leveraging strengths, managing time, and storytelling illustrate how students navigated mid-semester grade interventions. One of my coding cycles was particularly

helpful to arriving at these categories. Comparing in vivo and process codes next to each other (Saldaña, 2016) stimulated more vivid explanations of student experiences with resilience.

Helping

Giving and receiving help were experiences that students used to navigate mid-semester interventions. Help-seeking behaviors included asking questions about class materials to professors, requesting support from family members, or seeking peer help through study groups and learning communities. While I have noted the protective processes of professors in another section of this chapter, here I am emphasizing help-seeking and help-giving actions of students as ways of displaying resilience in their academic journey. Rosa noted the struggle of asking for help from professors because she did not want to be "annoying."

> I did ask for help. A lot of times I would email my teachers…but I also felt like I was being kind of annoying [laughing]…Um, cuz I felt like I was asking--kind of like, dumb questions. I would keep looking over the assignment they sent and try to figure things out on my own and then like, I really couldn't [do] it. I felt like the answer was right in front of me. So, I would email them anyways just because I didn't want to mess up on the assignment. But, I felt like I was like being annoying and missing something that they had told me already through the assignment.

Worried about faculty perceptions made Rosa reluctant to ask for help. Yet, not wanting to "mess up" the assignment prompted her to reach out. While her help-seeking behavior may have been prompted by fear, she shared that her professors were not annoyed by the requests. Instead, they encouraged her to continue to ask questions. It prompted a gentle sigh from Rosa that I interpreted as an expression of relief. While self-blaming behavior is associated with low

resilience (Southwick & Charney, 2018), the encouragement Rosa received from professors could prompt positive thinking about help-seeking during future challenges.

Others expressed that their siblings, who were also in college, provided help. In navigating the difficulties of his pre-calculus class, Jose sought to model his sister. He asked for her help as she had experience with similar coursework. “Whenever I have problems that I can’t solve or something, she explains to me the process. …she helps me out with things that I just don't understand myself.”

Although she was not sure why, Paris disliked asking for help, expecting a “how dare you ask for help!” response from the person she asked. Despite not requesting help for much of the semester, mid-semester grades prompted her to ask the financial aid office to clarify grade requirements for maintaining scholarships. She was surprised and relieved to learn that her scholarship would not be removed if her first semester grades were lower than the scholarship requirements.

> So, I was very worried about that. But the financial aid office was just like, well, we don't determine that until the end of the school year. I was like, oh, okay! So, I think I can do better next semester.

Consistent with Morales’ (2012) research on first-generation students in their first semester, the findings of this study indicate participants were more likely to seek help from people with whom they were already comfortable.

Giving Help

One of the most interesting findings in this study was that students saw a benefit in asking for help and in helping others. Participants shared they helped others through appreciation, inclusion of struggling students in study groups, and contributions to community

service projects. Helping others in their communities gave them a greater sense of connection, gratitude, and perspective that aided adaptation in their new environment.

Arturo shared the connection between receiving and giving help as he discussed an academic resilience strategy from his math studies.

> So, I was helping one of my classmates in math…Helping them out and working through some of the problems together also helped me strengthen my knowledge of math. So, it was a like a give and take relationship…

Arturo's example speaks to the overlap of building community and individual resilience. In reciprocating help, he was able to strengthen his skills while helping others.

In the following example, Leah reflects on her participation in a service project. She valued the opportunity to help her entire community rather than only those in her immediate circle of connections.

> I just hope I get more opportunities like this while I'm in college…I see that most people don't really want to do anything except for themselves or for the people they care about. So, like, I just want to do something for everybody.

Creating original activity sheets for children in regional hospitals gave Carmen a new perspective on the temporary periods of isolation she experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. She realized the children she was serving experienced isolation for many years because of their medical issues.

> I mean, there are children who have been in hospitals isolated almost their entire life. This year, like people are barely isolat[ing themselves]. But, you know there are other people who have been doing this for years.

Combining roles that focused on giving and receiving help encouraged expressions of resilience by reducing stigmatization of failure, lowering barriers to help-seeking, and increasing connectedness to their school community. Opportunities to provide help affirms the assets students bring to their college experience (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011; Yosso 2005). Students saw their ability to receive and contribute help as important to developing academic resilience in themselves and others.

Hoping Actively

An active hope permeated participants' thinking and decision making at mid-semester. These student examples and experiences add to Duncan Andrade's (2009) conceptualization of audacious hope. I have operationalized active hope as critical thinking and action towards a positive future, including planning "to becoming a better person" as Jose commented. The active nature of hope was noted by Paris who questioned whether hope was useful without it. "Well, like what is being hopeful gonna do? Is it gonna improve anything? It's more about the action, you know."

Defining herself as a work in progress, Santana elaborated on her plans for future semesters.

> I am a person that's always a work in progress. I feel like, even though I finished this whole semester, there's much more I can do. For example, after this semester was done, I started to think more about working on myself, like being physically active.

Students also noted hopefulness was not present in all aspects of their lives. Participants questioned how hopeful they could be about building relationships, growing professionally, or picturing themselves in a career given the pandemic-related uncertainties. Hopeful expressions were reflected in how participants viewed their transition. Arturo used "dipping his toes in" and Carmen used "ending on a good note" to reflect optimistic thinking and progress from tentative

beginnings to successful endings. These quotes reflect brief glimpses of experiences that could be explored in future interviews or studies.

Leveraging Strengths

As noted in the literature review, affirmation of strengths is an effective way to build resilience, especially among minoritized populations (Sherman, 2019; Walton & Cohen, 2011, Yosso, 2005). Throughout the interviews, participants reflected on strengths that helped them get to college, current strengths, and the strengths they anticipated using in future semesters. Participants' strengths included personality traits, values, and skills that enhanced their academics and aided them in overcoming challenges. Santana talked about how being a social person helped her make connections with classmates that ultimately led to friendships.

> I realized that I'm a social butterfly…people have like their profile pics [but] they usually don't have photos [of themselves]. They have a random photo like a character they like or something. So, whenever I was paired with them in a small group or something I am like—"I really like your picture!" I had no idea what it was, but I was just like, I really like your picture! What is your picture about? … and so that's how we became friends just because I asked about how cool the picture was…

Other participants mentioned follow-through as a strength. Leah shared: "I would work a full eight-hour shift. Coming home, I would be really tired, but…I would get back to work." The ability "to get back to work" with her academics helped her navigate the challenges of working 30 hours a week while also going to UC Merced full-time.

Arturo shared that his ability to appreciate others led to connections and gratitude for his college experiences.

> When I do that, it kind of comes back to the same thing of feeling grounded. So, I feel more connected to the people that I'm appreciative of…That makes me want to work harder. Because I can see the work they're doing for me, so I want to be able to meet that effort.

Finally, some participants shared that their strengths were not fully understood or connected to their academic resilience. Paris said she was not sure if she had strengths. Some saw that their strengths of "getting things done" (Leah) and "doing things on my own" (Rosa) needed to be complemented with personal reflection and connection with peers. The brevity of these expressions warrant deeper exploration in a future study.

These findings suggest that identification of strengths can be an important lever to activate resilience. These examples also show that utilizing strengths benefited both the individual student as well as their campus community. If cultural capital is "the sense of group consciousness and collective identity that serves as a resource aimed at the advancement of an entire group" (Franklin, 2002, p. 177), contributions of collective strengths can advance success at the community level.

Managing Time

Among all participants, managing time was an expression of academic resilience during and after mid-semester. How students managed themselves and scheduled their time for college tasks is discussed in this subcategory. For some, the busyness of balancing jobs and school responsibilities necessitated managing time well. For others, it was about getting things done or managing stress. Some remarked that before developing time management strategies, they felt distracted or overwhelmed. Participants used scheduling tools, planners, and readings from

Undergraduate Studies 10 to help them adapt to time challenges in college. Arturo described his use of a planner.

> I've started to keep a planner now and scheduled the times I actually sit down and just work on assignments. And I get distracted, so this has been really helpful. I'm still struggling with [distraction] a little bit, but it's a process that's helping me. I can see the positive effects of that.

Rosa used time forecasting to set goals and allocate realistic time frames as reflected in this excerpt.

> I think to myself, you can't spend like, 18 hours a day working on this one assignment. It's not possible and you're probably not going to be able to do it. And it's probably a waste of time. So, how long do you actually want to work on this assignment? So, I can work on it like, three hours a day if it's that big of an assignment.

Rosa continued that this practice not only helped her manage time for classwork but also helped her manage stress.

> So it's like okay, those three hours focus on that. Then the rest of the time, I just kind of like sit back and do whatever I need to do for any other classes… so like I calm myself down that way. I have a pretty good schedule. And then I have a to-do list, so I know when assignments are due, when I should probably start them, and how long I should probably take on them. So, I would be like, two hours for this assignment or like, one hour for this assignment.

Other participants realized “doing things at the last minute” (Jose) and “not having time to process” (Leah) during the first part of the semester were not working. They made changes in the second half of the semester to curb procrastination, build in periods to meditate, and schedule

time to help others. Leah shared the example of her mom preparing tamales with her family while also taking time to enjoy the process. “[My mom] just makes one, she takes her time…she appreciates the beauty.” In reflecting on this example, Leah was utilizing community cultural wealth to optimize her academic success.

Participants’ expressions provide additional evidence that managing time is an essential success skill in higher education (Downing, 2016). Managing time helped participants to adapt positively to external and internal adversities.

Storytelling

Participants’ reflective narratives gave insight into how they navigated challenges, mid-semester grades, and their understandings of personal strengths and weaknesses. Reflections were often shared as brief narratives describing transitional experiences, initial responses, and how cues from the environment worked together to shape thinking and actions. Student’s reflective vignettes also expressed how they planned to finish the current semester and begin the next semester. By imagining a worst-case scenario, Rosa’s reflective vignette helped her to realize the absurdity of her worry.

> When I was stressed, I had a lot of anxiety. Just because I tend to spiral into these scenarios where I fail my classes and then I have to retake them. And, I have to do all this stuff and it's really scary. But I sort of tried to calm myself down and talk to myself…what's the worst that can really happen? And that's why I go in and I like put zeros into my assignments to see if I did get a zero on this assignment, what would actually happen? Because I feel like once I get a grasp on the worst scenario, I can tell myself that you're obviously not going to do that!

Rosa continued by using self-talk to focus on the reality of the situation and what was doable.

> Like, figure out what you actually have to be stressed about because I don't work well under pressure…It's not my best work. So, I tried to take that pressure off of myself. Okay, like stop with all that other stuff. Like, this is where you actually have to worry about…what does the assignment say an A is? like a, B is? So, you can like, do that.

In reflecting on his failing mid-semester grade, Jose shared how he dealt with over-confidence and the lessons he learned.

> Sometimes I suffer from some sort of over-confidence in subjects that I think I already know a lot about…I need to know that although I do know the subject, I cannot become overconfident and understand that everyone has some sort of limitation. So, I had to practice the subjects again, even if I felt that I understood the topic.

In realizing that her class was not going to finish all of the content, Carmen decided to propose a final exam involving team presentations on the remaining material. Carmen remarked that the environment of the class, including close connections with the professor and her classmates, made sharing this idea possible.

> Yeah, so like for a few like weeks I was working on it. Because I'll say, oh, that would be a really cool idea. So, then I talked to some other people in my class about it. And they're like, yeah, that sounds really cool. We kind of gain more, like, information about a topic when we do our own research…And, so that's kind of how I presented it. So, I was like, if we could teach a topic then we learned [that] topic.

Reflective storytelling helped participants map changes in their thinking and expressions of resilience.

Expressions, displays and actions contributed to participants' resilience as they navigated the second half of the semester. The gerunds ("-ing" words) for *helping, hoping, leveraging*

strengths, and *storytelling* subcategories communicate the process nature of these expressions. As expressions of resilience, they need to be practiced consistently and adjusted to new circumstances. Because she will be taking different classes next semester, Carmen's conclusion that she will "need to come up with a different and new study style to adapt to those classes" is one example of how resilience expressions are situated as dynamic processes.

Meanings, processes, and expressions of resilience documented in this chapter have answered how first-generation Latina/o students make meaning of and experience resilience at UC Merced. In the next section, I have "restoryed" (Creswell & Poth, 2018) participants' experiences and words into a poem that serves as co-created summary of the findings. By categorizing the findings and introducing the narrative themes of *connecting, helping,* and *storytelling* to reflect the relationships between the categories, I have recognized the interconnected nature of the results. In chapter six, I will discuss the themes and their intersections with literature as well as implications for policies, practices, and research.

Summative Poem

Resilience

Experiences of first-generation Latina/o students in their first semester of college during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Fall 2020.

By James W.G. Barnes
with words and experiences from study participants

Isolation
I'll do it myself
Unconnected but over connected
Cameras off
I stay quiet-no one talks
It's not like being next to someone
How do I make the virtual
natural?

Gotta get use to my environment
That's the first thing
I have dipped my toes in
A test run?

Study groups
Pathways to connection
Let's keep in contact
Friend?
Why not ask than have no chance at all?

Mid-semester
Relieved, but still worried
Grades, yes
But learning too
Can't get lazy
How do I keep the momentum?

Parents, Professors, Places
Supporting
Motivating
An old desk from my sister
Studying on the floor no more
How do I honor and not betray?

Becoming aware of my strengths
Reaching out
Appreciating
Working hard
Learning a language not my own
Designing a final exam
Helping
How do I give and take?

Living and learning
My future is here
Planning
Tuning
Becoming better
Hoping
What is it without action?

Resilience
Feeling grounded
Pushing through failure
Unafraid
Surviving at times, but
Thriving is the goal.

CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Review of the Study

This qualitative study was designed to understand academic resilience meanings, processes, and experiences of first-generation Latina/o students in their first semester of college. Participants shared their understanding and experiences with resilience in real-time as they navigated the transition to UC Merced, mid-semester grade reporting, the COVID-19 pandemic, and online learning. Informed by resilience theories (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Morales & Trotman, 2004), protective processes (Maholmes, 2014; Rutter, 1993) and educational experiences of first-generation Latina/o students (Benson & Lee, 2020; Hurtado et al, 2015), this study has added to the body of resilience research.

To analyze the data, I combined narrative interview and campus survey data sources to arrive at a more inclusive understanding of resilience among first-generation Latina/o students at UC Merced. The resulting themes of *connecting, helping,* and *storytelling* reflect the process orientation of resilience. The applications for practice, policy, and research discussed in this chapter indicate that academic resilience is activated through the reciprocating relationships between themes.

Introduction

Like many institutions, the University of California, Merced has experienced unprecedented change and uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic and societal demands to prioritize equity and inclusion. Described by the former chancellor as a "teenager" rich with potential but still trying to find its place in the world (Leland, 2017) the university has also experienced rapid growth and financial challenges. This critical stage of the institution's development has created another level of urgency in how to best serve our first-generation Latina/o students. Resilience, beyond being embedded in the university's undergraduate hallmarks, is the word du jour in current discussions and

planning efforts during these challenging times. The rich meanings and experiences shared by students in this study provide reasons that resilience should be considered beyond its current popularity and put at the center of success-orientated planning. This study reflects the voices and stories of first-generation Latina/o students, how they understand resilience, and how it can be operationalized through academic resilience-building experiences. In doing so, it illuminates actions educators and leaders might take to help students transition to college, engage in protective processes, and learn resilience-building habits. It also provides a useful student-centered frame for UC Merced to align a hallmark of undergraduate education with student experiences and examples. Investing in resources, programs, and services that harness institutional resilience-building capacities can strengthen undergraduate education in this time of crisis.

In chapter five, I shared the categories of resilience meanings, processes, and experiences and introduced how these categories are connected to the three major themes of this study. In the following sections, I will discuss the major themes of *connecting, helping,* and *storytelling* and how they are framed in current educational contexts and literature. Then, I will discuss recommendations for polices, practices, and future research that encompass the research findings and themes. Quotations from participants are from interviews conducted between November and December 2020.

Discussion of Themes

Connecting

The connecting theme references the participants' desire to be grounded and comfortable in their environment. It includes the social interactions between students, families, educators, and the campus that create a sense of belonging. A sense of belonging is a well-established indicator of success in the college environment. In his research on students of color, Strayhorn (2019) described belonging as the sense of support from peers, educators, and family as perceived by students. Yet, the unfamiliar learning environments of college for many first-generation students of color present challenges to creating connections that lead to a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). For the

participants in this study, connection became a goal that was marked with progress but not always fully realized. It caused them to reach out, utilize their strengths, reflect on progress, and actively hope for future connection opportunities. Challenges to connecting were exacerbated by the online learning environment which lacked the element of in-person presence that participants desired. A recent study by Harvard's Graduation School of Education (2021), *Making Caring Common Project*, found 61% of young adults experienced serious loneliness, nearly twice the rate of other Americans. This statistic was cited in a National Public Radio article which also indicated that even well-established friendships among young adults were strained by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the article, two recent college graduates shared that being in each other's presence was a key aspect of their longtime friendship prior to COVID-19 (Bakkar, 2021). The pandemic forced them to confront a new question about connecting: "What does their friendship mean now with barriers and pandemic restrictions limiting their ability to be in the same space?" (Bakkar, 2021, para. 6).

The findings of my study provide examples of how connecting with established friends, family, and reaching out to make new connections aided student's resilience. Furthermore, no single activity or source led to a sustained feeling of connection to the campus. Instead, first-generation Latina/o students described the aggregated nature of connections. Through many connections, Jose began to feel a sense of belonging and support. He described that it was:

> …an accumulation of like, everybody trying to help me—my counselor definitely and [staff mentor] from [Undergraduate Studies 10]. Also, my teachers because they always offered office hours…so I don't think [I] can necessarily [say] one single person, but more like the whole sort of community that UC Merced gave me.

An interesting finding of this study was the impact of the virtual environment on students' abilities to connect, even during class. One of Santana's first challenges was learning how to answer a question in class. As a social person and learner, Santana wanted to fully participate in her courses. With the help of a peer advisor, Santana discovered the "raise hand" feature in Zoom (Zoom, 2021).

> And [professors] ask a question--Nobody answers! And I want to answer--like I really want to answer! But, I'm afraid when I put up my microphone. Is somebody else going to talk at the same time? Like, that's just awkward. So, with that challenge, I was just like--oh man--how am I going to do this?...Until like mid semester, I was not aware of this! But yeah, now I use the hand [raise].

The limitations of connecting in virtual learning environments suggest that universities should focus more intentionally on how to help students develop a sense of belonging and how to use online connection tools effectively. Given the varied and cumulative protective processes that support first-generation Latina/o students (Hurtado et al, 2015; Kitano, 1995), the implication section of this chapter details ways to reinforce resilience through expanded connection opportunities.

Helping: Students as Benefactors and Beneficiaries

In considering the helping theme, *benefactors and beneficiaries* is a useful pairing of terms that includes help-seeking behavior while also acknowledging the potential strengths and contributions of the helper role. It reflects a dynamic conceptualization of help in which participants may exchange and blend roles throughout an interaction. These terms were referenced in Walton and Cohen's (2011) research study on academic interventions in college among students of diverse backgrounds. In their study, participants were tasked with creating brief testimonials on how they overcame initial college transitions. They were told that the testimonials would be used by struggling students in the future. Because they did not realize it was also an intervention to support their success, it encouraged students to see themselves as "benefactors and not as beneficiaries" of help (Walton & Cohen, 2011, p. 1448). This reduced the stigma often associated with participation in academic interventions. While Walton and Cohen's (2011) terminology provides a more expansive view of helping behaviors, the findings of this study have altered the description of the benefactor-beneficiary relationship. Participants in my study shared that *both* providing help and seeking help were part of

their resilience processes. After overcoming some initial reluctance to helping behaviors, participants in this study considered roles to provide and seek help as symbiotic, even if these behaviors were expressed in different spheres of their lives. For example, several participants discussed asking for academic help from professors and peers and helping others through service projects. They saw both as useful to developing a sense of belonging, connection, and contribution to their college community. In "wanting to do something for everybody" through community service projects, Leah valued the opportunity to move beyond her immediate circle of connections to help her entire community.

While help-seeking might be a necessary strategy for success, providing help to others can be seen as an opportunity to embrace based on students' comfort levels, availability, and interest. Arturo offered an example of how participants blended the roles of receiving and giving help. He described the "give and take relationship" of helping fellow students work through problems in a math study group while also strengthening his academic skills.

In considering the benefactor and beneficiary dimensions of helping behaviors, university leaders can redesign student services with an equity-focused lens. The benefactor and beneficiary helping dynamic interrupts helper-recipient dichotomies which often perpetuate inequalities and dependency. Instead, the helping dynamic embraces the strengths and contributions students may bring to support services. Situating dynamic helping behaviors in an asset-based framework is a practice that social services and community development agencies use to build thriving individuals and communities. They work with program beneficiaries to map assets and then involve them in helping others even as they receive help (Lifeline, 2021; Love INC, 2021). Fostering the formation of study groups, expanding campus job opportunities, and encouraging students to share, write, and perform their stories are practical ways UC Merced may redesign campus experiences to nurture helping relationships. These recommendations are further discussed in the implications section of this chapter.

Storytelling: Students as Storytellers

Students shared their experiences in the form of narrative vignettes which reflected transition challenges, initial responses, and how understandings of the college environment shaped their expressions of resilience. Storytelling has a powerful history in personal meaning-making and the formation of culture, especially in communities of color (Anzaldúa, 1990). Yosso (2005) indicated that storytelling is a way to nurture cultural wealth in the forms of aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital. Through social and familial contexts, Yosso (2005) writes that stories, oral histories, parables, and proverbs are forms of linguistic capital that foster aspirations and challenge unjust conditions. In this way, academic resilience is a navigational process that helps students pursue their aspirations despite barriers to their success. Yosso (2005) writes, "resilience has been recognized as a set of inner resources, social competencies, and cultural strategies that permit individuals to not only survive, recover, or even thrive after stressful events, but also to draw from the experience to enhance subsequent functioning" (p. 80). Narratives can act as protective processes to help students understand themselves in new situations and how meanings of their social interactions can be altered. Rosa demonstrated the protective process of "story editing" (Wilson, 2011) in sharing how she managed stress and academic performance in college.

> When I was stressed, I had a lot of anxiety. Just because I tend to spiral into these scenarios where I fail my classes and then I have to retake them. And, I have to do all this stuff and it's really scary. But I sort of tried to calm myself down and talk to myself…what's the worst that can really happen?...Because I feel like once I get a grasp on the worst scenario, I can tell myself that you're obviously not going to do that!

Reflective practices have also been shown to increase the size of certain brain regions that "produce neurotransmitters such as serotonin and norepinephrine [which] are critically involved in regulating arousal, attention, mood, reward, and learning" (Southwick & Charney, 2018, p. 24). Narratives also strengthen the brain's neuroplasticity which allows students to connect the affective

and cognitive dimensions of their lived experience into a coherent framework that can be used to adapt to future challenges. (Southwick & Charney, 2018)

Often, educational systems have not valued stories as forms of knowledge (Anzaldúa, 1990); however, the findings of this study indicate that academic resilience is shaped, in part, by how students narrate their experiences. Helping students to see themselves as the authors of their success stories recognizes the experiential forms of knowledge they use to navigate challenges, create social networks, and support their academic goals.

Implications for Policy and Practice

In 2020, the UC Merced campus completed one of the largest and fastest university building projects ever attempted in the United States. The 1.3-billion-dollar project has doubled the size of the campus in four years (UC Merced Project 2020, 2019). Enrollment has also grown 600% in 10 years (UC Merced Fast Facts, 2020). As a period of extreme growth and campus change has concluded, it has become intertwined with additional challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Seismic shifts to online instructional delivery, campus life and services, along with pending budget cuts, provide additional reasons for the university to harness academic resilience as a way to help students adapt during this challenging period. There is an urgency to develop flexible programs to ensure high quality student experiences. In the following section, I have aligned findings and themes from this study with high-impact practices (Kuh et al., 2008) and asset-based program frameworks (Yosso, 2005) to suggest policies and practices that build resilience. Each practice, policy, and research suggestion aligns with the themes of this study by enhancing students' ability to connect, give and receive help, and develop their personal resilience narrative. Furthermore, the implications discussed in the chapter indicate that reciprocating relationships between themes can further support academic resilience in students.

Increase Access to Learning Communities

Resilience-building habits among first-generation Latina/o students could be augmented through greater access to institutional and peer-led learning communities. These would foster connections, support help-seeking and giving, and encourage development of affirming narratives. One example of a formalized learning community on the UC Merced campus is a living learning community. Living learning communities are defined by a common set of classroom experiences that are connected to co-curricular experiences in the location where students live (Kuh et al., 2008). Although it is a high-impact practice in higher education (Kuh et al., 2008), the availability of living learning communities at UC Merced is limited. Before campus housing was modified due to the COVID-19 pandemic, less than 15% of first-year students were enrolled in a living learning community as reported by the Associate Director of Residence Education (M. Rosales, personal communication, March 4, 2021). Since participants indicated that connections, modeling, and help available through learning communities aided their academic resilience, the university should work to ensure all students have access to these communities.

Simply being in a learning community is not enough to aid students in academic resilience building experiences (Kuh et al., 2008). Within learning communities, high quality, integrated classroom and co-curricular experiences, faculty involvement, and peer support are distinguishing factors that have been shown to increase engagement and retention of students of all backgrounds (Kuh et al., 2008). Designed for first-generation students, UC Merced's Fiat Lux Living Learning Community hosts faculty networking lunches to help students develop positive relationships with faculty outside the classroom (UC Merced Fiat Lux, 2021). As students develop networking abilities, communication skills, and engage in a supportive atmosphere to explore majors, research, and career opportunities (UC Merced Fiat Lux, 2021), they can strengthen protective supports that foster academic resilience. Including faculty who were also first-generation students is an important consideration in formulating culturally responsive events (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). Because the

Fiat Lux Scholars Program only has capacity to serve about 25% of eligible first-generation students (UC Merced Fiat Lux, 2021), expanding access is recommended.

The findings of this study also indicated that peer led study groups can be important ways to build resilience habits. If organized effectively, study groups can positively impact student success (Downing, 2016). Kuh et al. (2008) stated that study groups can promote collaborative learning, a high-impact educational practice for college students of all backgrounds. In *The Latino Student's Guide to College Success*, Valverde (2012) encouraged students to join study groups to "share opinions, test out ideas and clarify points with which you are having difficulty" (p. 67). In referencing Yosso's (2005) broad conceptualization of familial capital, peer study groups may result in "caring, coping and providing" (p. 79) experiences. The kinship and community aspects of these experiences can be leveraged to adapt successfully to college challenges. Santana spoke about the friendships that formed as a result of a group project.

> My group project peers from my writing class--I still communicate with them. Like, either we call [each other] or give a text. Whenever somebody posts something online, they're like, oh my God, you look really nice or this and that.

According to UCUES (2021) data, only 44% of first-year UC Merced students participated in a study group. Especially during remote and online learning periods, it is recommended that the university increase efforts to encourage students to form study groups. Perhaps this could be achieved by encouraging faculty to structure study groups into their courses.

Participants in this study indicated that study groups were formed through organizational efforts of their peers and often used an online platform separate from classroom or university virtual tools. This suggests that students prefer to select their own mediums to build peer study groups. For those reluctant to seek help from professors, study groups can provide a comfortable initial step in displaying help-seeking behavior and formulating mutually beneficial connections.

A Job or Internship Opportunity for Every Student

In addition to lessening the financial burdens of college, jobs and internships offer students opportunities to gain skills, improve networks with staff and peers, and contribute to their social lives (Callender, 2008). Therefore, having a job can be a key driver of connection and an important means of activating resilience. Bennington College's field work term is a model for the inclusion of work experiences in undergraduate education goals (Bennington College, 2021). Students spend seven weeks in an annual internship or work experience that enhances learning, reflection, and competency development. They develop a capacity to "grasp and enter complex situations…and the confidence to be mobilized by ambiguities, trade-offs, and uncertainties" (Bennington College, 2021, para. 2). These capacities can enhance resilience habits critical for academic and workplace success. While each student's unique circumstances should be considered, working up to 10 hours per week has been shown to increase academic success and satisfaction with college (Tessema et al., 2014). For first-generation students, having a job may cause them to have less time for academic, extracurricular, and career building activities (Pascarella et al. 2004). Therefore, it is essential for universities to consider flexible work experiences and options as part of the campus curriculum for all students.

A position on campus also embraces the helping dynamic, an important finding of this study. Jobs and internships provide opportunities to learn skills while positioning students as important contributors to the university community. Internships and jobs may also nurture aspirational, navigational, and social capital (Yosso, 2005) as students connect work experiences with future goals, learn more about university resources, and interact with peers in team settings. Given the growing concerns about food and financial security among college students (Nadworny, 2020), the opportunity to have a job or internship in their first-year of college has many additional resilience-building benefits.

Increase Opportunities for Families to Support Students

The supportive relationships of parents and siblings were powerful protective processes noted in this study and in literature (Ceja, 2005; Jackson-Newsome et al., 2008). Too often, our educational systems have isolated students from familial support structures and sources of cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). While participants in this study most frequently named parents and siblings as examples of family support, their definitions of family also included friends and learning communities. This finding reflected Yosso's (2005) conceptualization of familial capital which includes the kinship and communal bonds of extended family and friends.

Additional opportunities for connection along with augmentation of existing campus events could better support students' development of resilience. For new UC Merced families, offering additional language translation services and opportunities to interact with families of current students could model "caring, coping and providing" supports (Yosso, 2005, p.79). Beyond involvement in the beginnings (orientation) and endings (graduation) of college, additional ways to engage families as partners in their student's success can be fostered. Including family members in annual academic excellence celebrations, athletic events, and cultural activities are examples of how the university can engage families throughout college. Family support systems could be further developed through periodic online resource fairs that highlight access to services and showcase opportunities that students may not have considered previously. For students struggling at mid-semester, academic recovery options that include family support could be presented. Materials and resources for families to support their students at mid-semester could be printed in a newsletter or accessed through a webpage available in a wide variety of languages. Additionally, culturally-responsive coaching programs provided by university advisors, faculty, or staff could help students engage in meaningful academic support conversations with family partners. To bridge connection gaps and support a wide variety of family structures, social media or moderated online forums could be used to expand social support networks for families and their students.

Build a Strengths-Based Curriculum

Using asset-based models, resilience researchers have sought to understand how an individual's strengths can be used to combat the negative effects of adversity and enhance adaptation (Henderson & Milstein, 1996; Maholmes, 2014). This coincides with UC Merced's recent efforts to re-orientate campus services in ways that acknowledge the assets students bring to college (UC Merced Student Affairs, 2021). Asset-framed programs are already available in many areas of the UC Merced campus. The first-year success course, Undergraduate Studies 10, helps students to map their assets (UC Merced Calvin E. Bright Success Center, 2021). Career and academic advisors use StrengthsFinder assessments and tools in consultations with students (UC Merced Center for Career & Professional Advancement, 2021). Leadership development programs use the Social Change Leadership model which affirms that all members of our community have the capacity for leadership (UC Merced Office of Leadership Service and Career, 2021). While these are examples of the numerous ways UC Merced is acknowledging student strengths, the impact of these efforts is limited by unsystematic utilization and inadequate capacities. While some participants in this study understood their strengths, others were not sure what strengths they brought to college (Paris), or did not know if their strengths could be fully used in the online learning environment (Arturo, Rosa, and Santana). These findings indicate the need for better access, integration, and coordination between asset-based programs so all students can use their strengths to advance their academic goals. When students participate in coordinated services, there is strong evidence for improved academic outcomes (Finley & McNair, 2013; Keup, 2006; Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). A first-year experience course is an available medium to integrate strengths-based programs and expand access to include all first-generation Latina/o students. Currently, Undergraduate Studies 10 first-year success course serves about 100 students per year. Connecting the course to curriculum and graduation requirements would scale offerings to create equitable participation (Kuh & Kinzie, 2018) for all students at UC Merced.

Beyond the inclusion of asset-based offerings discussed above, I am recommending that additional reflective and storytelling activities be systematically integrated into a first-year success course curriculum. These experiences could also be adapted and used within strengths-based programs outside of the course. The activities suggested below are applications of *connecting, helping* and *storytelling* themes and high-impact practices widely tested by other researchers (Kuh et al., 2008).

Reflective Experiences

Authors have noted the positive impact of reflective writing experiences in college, including social integration (Tinto, 2012), feedback and metacognition activities (Huntly & Donovan, 2009), and student engagement (Braxton et al., 2008). Also, Everett (2013) shared the impact of reflective journaling in improving learning outcomes in a first-year seminar course. Through weekly writing exchanges with their professor, students developed self-awareness, wrestled with challenges, and gained new perspectives on their well-being and social engagement (Everett, 2013). In learning about themselves and discussing adversities, students used narratives to build "resilient efficacy" (Bandura, 2008, p. 2). Their narratives helped them move through adversities and successfully navigate future challenges. At UC Merced, coordinating narrative exercises with mid-semester grade reporting could prompt reflection on academic challenges and positive adaptations in ways that build efficacy.

Beginning to author their resilience narrative may also act as a protective process students can leverage to connect to their community. To fulfill a requirement for his Undergraduate Studies 10 class, Arturo attended a workshop where he developed a virtual collage of pictures, quotes, and goals that prompted reflection on his academic story. Yet, Arturo articulated that the most important part of the experience was sharing his collage with other participants. "One of things that was really strong for me was connect[ing] with the people around me. So, I actually had to practice that during the workshop."

In addition to writing, reflective experiences can be developed through a variety of creative mediums. As an instructor, I have experimented with weekly reflective assignments including audio blogs, creative visual reflections, and TikTok-style videos (TikTok, 2021) which provided a variety of formats for students to explore their resilience narrative. In my class, students were offered the opportunity to share their creative reflections in small group settings. Sharing their stories enriched students' sense of community, lessened the vulnerability of self-disclosure, and empowered fellow students to request or provide help.

Capstone Project: Video Storytelling

Storytelling has a rich history in how cultural wealth is shared among peoples of color (Yosso, 2005). The Undergraduate Studies 10 video capstone project embraces storytelling as a way for students to explore resilience narratives and operationalize their unique strengths. After assembling a resilience box of personal artifacts, students created a five-minute video narrative that described their strengths, goals, and progress towards the scholar they wanted to become. Beyond the end of the course, the resilience box was designed as a resource that students could use to "bounce back" when experiencing future challenges.

As an effective medium to explore resilience narratives, the video storytelling project allowed for authenticity and individualization in a participatory experience that combined narration, "still and moving images, music and other art into a short film" (Shapiro-Perl, 2017, p. 171). The short format "create[d] the ideal condition for the production of elegant, high-impact stories by people with little or no experience" in filmmaking (Burgess, 2006, p. 207). Students were both the *subjects* of the film and the *lead participants* in the production of the project. Viewing their story from multiple vantage points led to a greater understanding of themselves. This format also validated the words and experiences of students from diverse backgrounds that often are "unseen and unheard" (Shapiro-Perl, 2017, p. 171). As a "two-way process of connection and transformation" (Shapiro-Perl, 2017, p. 177) between the storyteller and the viewer, the video storytelling project created narrative-building,

connecting, and helping interactions between students. In their video storytelling project, a student shared that a tortilla press served as a source of physical and emotional nourishment in college. Using the tortilla press artifact helped the student explore their resilience narrative by reflecting upon the hard work of ancestors, the support of family, and the connections made with other students through homemade food.

Implications for Research

With a focus on the perspectives and experiences of Latina/o first-generation students, this study has added to the body of resilience research. Yet, the situational and dynamic conceptualization of resilience (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Rutter, 1993) provides ample opportunities for further research. Given the unprecedent events of 2020 including the COVID-19 pandemic, societal demands for equity, and pivots to online education, future research with this study's participants as they progress through college would produce additional findings about resilience processes and habits. With a return to campus instruction and involvements in fall of 2021, participants in this study may have new insights about how connecting, helping, and reflecting experiences in the campus environment impact their resilience habits. Participants would also have the opportunity to reflect on their entire first year and share how their understandings of resilience may have evolved. Additionally, research on resilience processes could be connected with other holistic student success measures such as the Thriving Quotient (Schreiner et al., 2012) and assessment of UC Merced's Hallmarks of Baccalaureate Degree (UC Merced Hallmarks, 2019). While this study provides first-year student experiences of "respond[ing] with resiliency to obstacles and challenges, and learn[ing] from failure" (UC Merced Hallmarks, 2019), research among graduating seniors, for example, could provide a more complete understanding of this undergraduate education goal.

The implications for practice and policy sections proposed systematic ways to develop resilience habits that are aligned with high impact practices in higher education (Kuh et al., 2008). By providing methods of enhancing students' ability to connect, help, and develop their resilience

narrative, each practice, policy, and research suggestion aligns with the themes of this study. Orientating future research on how these practices may work together to activate resilience would assist universities in developing inclusive resilience-building systems that help first-generation Latina/o students to thrive.

Directions for Further Study

The COVID-19 pandemic and unexpected shifts to remote instruction have added additional layers of challenges that have more directly exposed the need to create systems that assist students in connecting, helping, and crafting narratives to build academic resilience. Given that the unique circumstances surrounding this study may never be repeated, there is risk that these clear needs could become opaque. Furthermore, the lasting effects of COVID-19 on students and educational systems are unknown. Therefore, this study has important value in its understanding of students' resilience experiences during this unique time and as a foundation for further analysis.

Connecting, *helping* and *storytelling* create conditions for resilience through reciprocating relationships within students and their environment. Researchers have introduced reciprocal altruism as a contributor to personal resilience (Everly, 2020; Everly & Lating, 2019; Noullet et al., 2017). Yet, the findings of this study indicate that resilience theories should be extended beyond the habits, circumstantial factors, and environmental influences of an individual. Collectivist support structures found in communities of color (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011; Yosso, 2005) and further illuminated in this study warrant consideration of new culturally responsive resilience-building systems to support student success. This author posits *reciprocal resilience* as a systems-based model that emphasizes processes where members both contribute to and benefit from the collective persistence of the community, extending Everly's (2020) individualized conceptualization of the term. To further develop this model, interdisciplinary approaches that combine resilience theory with resilience systems research found in ecology, environment sustainability (Folke et al., 2010; Holling, 1973; Walker et al., 2010), and spiritual development fields (Francis, 2019; Noullet, et al. 2018) can be

used. As I consider directions for further studies, I am interested in answering the following questions:

- How do reciprocating relationships between the themes of this study influence, intersect, and support students at each stage of their college career?
- What interdisciplinary approaches could be used to further develop a reciprocal resilience systems model?
- How do we measure the effectiveness of connecting, helping, and narrative development processes in building resilience habits?
- What is the interplay of help-seeking and help-giving behaviors that build resilience in individuals and communities?

Pursuing these directions will help to further explore and validate the results of this study, resolve remaining questions, and build an agenda for future research of resilience theories and systems.

Limitations

The amount of data collected in this study was significant and some of the data gathered was beyond the scope of my study. Relevance to my research interests and questions has caused me to explore certain aspects of the data deeply while not discussing others. I selected seven participants to achieve the depth necessary for this qualitative study. While my sample of participants were selected purposefully, additional participants or demographic representations would add other unique perspectives.

Having served at UC Merced in professional leadership capacities since 2006, the inaugural school year, I bring a deep sense of history, admiration, and understanding of the students and campus community. I am part of the university's history and its development is part of me. While many of the implications shared are applicable to faculty roles, academic programs, and classroom environments, additional perspectives from faculty would more directly speak to the ways they could be partners and resilience builders in these efforts. This educational environment also reminds me that

my college experience was different from the students I serve. UC Merced students draw upon support systems that are reflective of this time, place, and their culture. Coming from a family of college graduates, I have not experienced the environmental, cultural, and family pressures that many first-generation Latina/o students experience. To counter the biases influenced by my background and experiences, I have used methods and coding that allow student voices to be the focus. Yet, I understand my perspectives as a White male with college educated parents have influenced this study. I also acknowledge my role in not recognizing opportunities to further explore the lived experiences of certain participants and topic areas. While 20 years of experience as an educator in Student Affairs has allowed me to bring unique perspectives, students may have assumed that I did not fully understand or empathize with their experiences. This speaks to a question I have considered throughout my research process: *Who determines if and when a person is resilient, the participant or researcher?* Because their experiences are different than mine, I have guarded against associating resilience with only the most heroic student behaviors (Massey et al., 1998; Stitzlein, 2018). Initial and follow-up interview protocols, field note and analytic memo reflections, member checks, and triangulation methods tested findings with other data sources and helped me account for these biases.

The focus of this study is the environment of UC Merced and its students. While from a diverse set of cultural backgrounds, students had characteristics in common, including taking a full class load and being 18 to 19 years old. The majority of participants in this study were Latina. While this research provides unique insights into the experiences of this population, additional Latina/o perspectives would enhance the validity of the findings. Because students participated in this study during their first semester, conceptualizations of resilience and understanding of their abilities may change over time. While students' experiences in this study provided valuable insights in identifying resilience-building levers, further studies could explore how and where students experienced shifts in their resilience development. Despite these limitations, a focus on first-year students at the critical

starting point of their college careers (Morales, 2012; Skipper, 2017) has influenced understandings of how initial experiences can help students thrive in the UC Merced environment.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that all students have the capacity for resilience. Rather than a trait to be earned, resilience is a dynamic process that has individual, situational, and environmental contributors. Given that resilience is ordinary (Masten, 2001) and can be nurtured (Southwick & Charney, 2018), we can think of resilience as a habit that can be practiced and learned with appropriate supports. This study provided examples of protective processes, environmental systems, and narratives that fostered emerging resilience habits in participants. As a habit, resilience is a social construction. Philosopher Pierre Bourdieu's description of *habitus* is defined by the habits, skills, and dispositions about the world shaped by groups and cultures within society (Jenkins, 2002). Because resilience is a social skill rather than a biological trait, individual agency along with processes and practices in the school environment can be developed to make it part of the *habitus* of higher education.

This study has examined the meanings, processes, and experiences of academic resilience in first-generation Latina/o students. Conducting this study as students navigated the COVID-19 pandemic in their first semester of college has provided a unique lens for understanding initial college success during a period of unprecedented change and uncertainty. Understanding meanings and experiences of resilience provides a framework of flexible, systematic, and asset-based approaches where students recognize past experiences as assets. In doing so, students become empowered as authors of their success stories.

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APPENDIX A

Screening Script

1. Are you enrolled in the Undergraduate Studies 10 First-Year Seminar Course?

___Yes
___No

2. Are you 18 years old or older?

___Yes
___No

3. Are you a first-generation college student? For this study, this means you are the first in your family to attend college.

4. Do you self-identify as: (select all that apply)

____African-American/Black
____Asian
____Hispanic/Latinx
____Native American/Alaskan Native
____Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander
____White

APPENDIX B

Narrative Interview One - Protocol and Questions

SECTION	CONTEXT & QUESTIONS
Welcome, General Housekeeping Items, and Forms (2 minutes)	Welcome. My name is James Barnes. I am a graduate student at UC Davis and will be conducting today's interview. Thank you for taking the time to share your insight and experiences. If you need a break at any time, please let me know. Before we begin, I want to make sure all of the necessary forms and information I sent to your email have been received and completed. Consent Form Agenda and Interview Overview If you have not done so, please take a moment to complete the consent form. Since I will be audio recording the interview for research purposes, I need your informed consent before we begin.
Consent (2 minutes)	Please remember your participation today is voluntary and you should only share things that you feel comfortable in discussing with me. You may stop the interview at any time. I will keep all information you provide today confidential. To protect your confidentiality, your comments will not be linked with personally identifying information. I will be audio recording our discussion so I can listen to your comments later. To further protect your confidentiality, please use your first name only. Additionally, your personally identifying information will not appear when I present this study or publish its results.

Purpose of Interview (2 minutes)	The purpose of this interview is to learn how you experience resilience in your academic life. For the interview today, please share your meaning of resilience and experiences of resilience. My intention today is to have a conversation about this topic with you rather than getting answers to specific questions. I have a list of questions to ask, but our time together will be guided by listening to you. Based on what you share, I may ask you to discuss more about your experiences in an area. There may be periods of silence as I want to give you time to reflect on experiences. You may elaborate if needed. I would be happy to answer any questions before we start. Our interview will last approximately 45 minutes.
General Information (10-15 minutes)	1. Can you describe your educational journey in college? 2. How did you end up here at UC Merced? 3. Is there anything or anybody significant that you would credit for getting you where you are today academically? Potential Follow Up Questions You said without_____you don't think you would have made it here. What did it/they do exactly? • How often did you meet with____ • Can you think of a specific time when_____assisted you academically since you have been here? You said/you wrote that ____ was critical to your success, what did you mean? • Can you a specific time when___led to doing well in college? • Do you ever find it difficult to maintain____? • Where do you think_____came from? • How would your current academic status be different if you didn't have_____
Meaning and Experiences of Resilience (12 minutes)	4. UC Merced's Hallmarks of the Baccalaureate lists "respond[ing] with resiliency to obstacles and challenges, and learn[ing] from failure" as important goal of your education here (UC Merced Hallmarks of the Baccalaureate Degree, 2019). • What does resilience mean to you? • What does academic resilience mean to you?

	5. I have witnessed academic resilience at UC Merced...(By "witnessed", I mean anything you were present to see, including something that happened to you. Please note that you do not need to share the source of the information.) 6. Is resilience important to your success in college? If not, why? If so, why? 7. Does resilience benefit you? Can you elaborate on how?
Protective Processes/Mid-Semester Interventions (10 minutes)	8. What did you do when you experienced a challenge? How did you know how to do that? What was the result? 9. Did university asked you to participate in a mid-semester intervention? What meaning did this experience have for you? 10. What strengths have you brought to the college experience? Have they influenced your academics?
Closing (2 minutes)	I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me and share your experiences. Your input and participation is critical to this project and I value your perspectives, insight, and experiences. Here is a card with my contact information. Please feel free to contact me if you think of anything else you would like to add. As I begin to analyze this data for this project, I'd like to get your feedback. Would you be interested in doing so?

APPENDIX C

USTU-10 Instructor Survey-Fall 2020

1. Did you have class activities or assignments where students reflected on their academic challenges, progress, or successes in relationship to what they were learning in class? If so, what were these called (e.g. reflections, journals, writing assignments, video or audio logs, final projects, etc.)?

2. Did your course section have class activities, assignments or discussions about mid-semester grades? If so, can you briefly describe?

3. Did your course incorporate student's strengths or assets (e.g. identification/assessment of strengths, use for class community building, application of strengths in their academics, etc.)?

APPENDIX D

Narrative Interview Two - Protocol and Questions

Introduction/Follow Up From Previous Interview	1. Would you please share with me about how these last few weeks of the semester have gone. What has been going on? 2. Last time we spoke you said without_____ you wouldn't have made it to college. Does this represent your experience? 3. You have nearly finished your first semester in college. Is there anything or anybody significant that you would credit for getting you to this point?
Meaning and Experiences of Resilience	4. Last time we talked you shared that resilience means this ___(insert meaning of resilience)____. Is this what you meant? a. What do you think now? b. Was there a time when you noticed yourself or someone else being resilient? 5. Were there supports at the university that have helped you overcome challenges? 6. Have your identities influenced how you experience resilience?
Navigating Mid-Semester Interventions	7. Think back to when you received your mid-semester grades. What was that moment was like for you? a. What has happened with your academics between then and now? b. Now that the semester is over, how do you think you are doing? 8. You'll be finishing your first semester soon, if you have not already. What do you anticipate that experience will be like?

Protective Processes	9. When we spoke a few weeks ago you were experiencing__ (insert academic challenge)__. Is this accurate? a. What is going on now? b. How did you deal with that challenge the last weeks of the semester? c. What will you do next semester when you experience a challenge? 10. Is there any experience (or realization or encounter) this semester that helped you understand more about yourself? a. If so did this impact your academic achievement? How? 11. Now that the semester is over, how do you currently view yourself as a college student? a. Was there anything you learned or reflected on in Undergraduate Studies 10 (USTU-10) that influenced this view? 12. Last time we talked, you shared that _____was a strength you brought to the college experience. Is this accurate? a. What strengths do you anticipate bringing to your second semester in college? To say thank you for participating in an interview, I would like to give you a gift card via email. Can you please let me know which email to send it to?

APPENDIX E

Codebook

Research Questions

1. How do first-year first-generation Latina/o students make **meaning** of and experience **academic resilience**?

    a. What are the **protective processes** students leverage when faced with academic adversity?
    b. In what ways may students **display or express academic resilience** when navigating mid-semester interventions?

Code	Description	Example
Meanings of Resilience	Students meanings and conceptualizations of resilience.	
• Connected to place or environment (comfortable in surroundings, grounded)	Connection to people and programs that leads to feeling grounded and comfortable in place.	"So, it's having a connection to the place or to the people I'm working with. Getting to know where I am. That's really important for me. Because in that adds to the importance of what I'm doing there. Like it kind of reminds me, oh, this is like a great place. And I like the programs here. I like the people here. And you know they're working to help me and they're working to better themselves, so I want to be a part of that."
• Not fearing failure	Failure can be part of the process of success and resilience.	"If you see an obstacle don't like, try to run away from it, and try to like to find a way around it, or through it."
• Self-Efficacy and Agency	Self-Efficacy: Doing ones best, trying hard even after failing.	"Like, ever since I was like a child, She was like, oh, you know, I want to study hard like get good grades, you know, if you don't get them. It's fine. If you don't, you know, I won't get mad just try your hardest. So, like that mentality, kind of like, helped me, like, try to do my best. I wasn't forced to get good results but kind of [was] encouraged to do them. I have friends who their parents are very strict and like expect them to get like straight As."

	Agency: Making the most of opportunities, even when the situation is not ideal.	"Because no matter what happens, no matter what type of circumstances…Specifically this semester, with COVID and all the things that are going on. You have to be able to push yourself because you can't put an excuse if you're given the opportunity to do something. Even if you don't have all the necessary resources or you're not necessarily put in the best position, you still have to make something out of it. And being able to do that through this sort of pandemic and just a bunch of surrounding problems--it's something that you have to do. And it's not something you can just put up an excuse and believe that that's enough to account for everything."
• Survival	Doing what you have to do to make it through.	"It's funny that you bring up resilience, because as kid, and especially the way I grew up, people were like, wow, you're very resilient…I used to never know like what it meant. I'm just like, What do you mean I'm resilient? It just do what I have to do…It's kind of like a form of survival, I guess."
Protective Processes	Protective processes are dynamic supports which protected participants from adversities and encouraged resilience habits. The layered influences of individual and environmental factors is consistent with research on protective processes (Rutter 1987, 1993).	
• Family	This subcategory includes both parents and siblings. Parents acted as financial backers and examples of hard work. Family members, including both parents and siblings, provided motivational, academic and emotional support during challenges.	"I guess like the flip side of the coin, because most of my family--outside of like my immediate family--like aunts, uncles, cousins--they didn't really have that higher education or didn't pursue higher education. And in that compared to my immediate family with my sister and my brother pursuing higher education. I know that "I want to follow that path because I don't want to end up essentially in the same place that my parents were at.

	Parents and siblings were also genuinely interested what they were doing in school. Family members' schooling or work experiences provided examples of what to do or not do.	So, being able to see both sides of it and seeing the outcomes and the consequences of both of the actions, it led me to believe that I have to do this because it will lead to a better future for me."
• Learning Communities	Describes participation in camps, classroom, and living learning communities that created a sense of welcome, academic support, or family like atmosphere.	"Even though we're not in person, online is seems like I met them in person. It has that vibe there in that class. Like, everybody everybody's chill with each other. Everybody knows each other, like if we knew each other in person."
• Self-Awareness	This subcategory reflects student's realizations about themselves and how they used this knowledge to manage changes and challenges.	"One of the themes of that experience was kind of accepting insecurities and getting over them. So for me, it was like it's all about reaching out to other people and like actually connecting with them and being more sociable. From before, looking at those insecurities, I would you know I would categorize myself as introverted before that and an extroverted after that. But I do know that extroverted has been my personality the whole time, but it's been locked away by insecurities."
• Teachers	Teachers encouraged and challenged participants in ways that helped them realize things about themselves. They did this by providing books, encouraging them to pursue leadership opportunities, and urging them to take challenging classes. They also offered constructive and challenging feedback when they were off course.	"Well, she's, she's she hasn't really told me to see on one path. She said to keep my options open. Because then she shared her story too. She mentioned that her senior year of college—she took an art class. She was like, oh, what if I would have taken that class earlier? I would have probably gotten a minor in art and probably would have done other things."

Resilience Experiences	In focusing on the "display" and "express" words in the research question, the category includes specific experiences, displays or actions that led to academic resilience.	
• Active Hope	Reflects critical thinking and action towards a positive future. Participants questioned the purpose of hope when it is not connected to action.	"As I mentioned in the previous question, a person that's always a work in progress. I feel like even that I finished this whole semester, I feel like there's much more things I can do. For example, after this semester was done, I started to think more about working on myself. Like [being] physically active."
• Help	Reflects findings associated with help-seeking and help-giving behaviors that involved peers, faculty, and their communities.	Asking for Help: "I did ask for help. A lot of times I would email my teachers. And stuff, but I also felt like I was being kind of annoying…Um, cuz I felt like I was asking--kind of like, dumb questions. I would keep looking over the assignment that they sent and trying to figure things out on my own and then like, I really couldn't [do] it. I felt like the answer was right in front of me. So, I would email them anyways just because I didn't want to like mess up on the assignment. But I felt like I was like being annoying and missing something that they had told me already through the assignment. No, [the professors] were good. They kept telling me to keep asking questions and everything." Giving Help: "So having this chance right now as a college student. I just hope I get more opportunities like this while I'm in college…I see that most people don't really--like they don't want to do anything except for themselves or for the people they care about. So, like I just want to do something for everybody. You know, like everything for one!"

• Leveraging Strengths	Participants reflected on the strengths that helped them get to college, their current strengths, and the strengths they anticipated using in future semesters. Strengths included personality traits, values, and skills that enhanced their academics and aided them in challenges.	"I realized that I'm a social butterfly… So like, so adjusting to online I had to push myself. When there was like certain like--in classes and people have like their profile pics. They usually don't have their photos [of themselves]. They have like a random photo like a character they like or something. So, whenever I was paired with them in a small group or something I am like—"I really like your picture!" I had no idea what it was, but I was just like, I really like your picture! What is your picture about? … and so that's how we became friends just because I asked how cool the picture was…it's just really nice to like have people in Merced, who also like, you know, [are] struggling to adjust to this sort of thing."
• Storytelling	Brief narrative reflections describing transitional experiences, initial responses, and how cues from the environment shaped thinking and actions. Their reflective vignettes also expressed how they planned to finish the current semester and begin the next semester.	"I mean, when I was stressed, I had a lot of anxiety. Just because I tend to like spiral into these scenarios where I like fail my classes and then I have to retake them and like I have to do all this stuff and it's really scary. But I sort of tried to like calm myself down and talk to myself...Really like, what's the worst that can really happen? And that's why I go in and I like put zeros into my assignments to see like if I did, like, for some reason, get a zero on this assignment, what would actually happen? Because I feel like once I get a grasp on it. The worst scenario I can tell myself like you're obviously not going to do that!" "Like, figure out what you actually have to be stressed about because I don't work well under pressure…It's not my best like work. So I tried to take that pressure off of myself. Okay, like stop with all that other stuff that. Like this is where you actually have to worry about… and like what does the

		assignment say in A is? like a, B is? So, you can like, do that.”
• Managing Time	This subcategory discusses how students managed themselves and scheduled their time for college tasks.	“And as far as assignments go for UC Merced said I've started to keep a planner now. And scheduled the times or I actually sit down and just work on assignments. And I get distracted, so this been really helpful. I'm still struggling with that a little bit, but it's a process that's helping me. I can see the positive effects of that.”