



**Who Should Read**

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Student Affairs Leaders

Orientation Directors

First Year  
Experience/Seminar  
Directors

# Prime First-Year Students for Success with Resilience and Coping Skills

# First-Year Students Are Overwhelmed and Anxious

## Many Students Encounter Difficulties Adjusting to College

The first year can be full of difficult transitions, including moving to campus, meeting new roommates, establishing a new routine, and adjusting to new classes and expectations. Given all of these changes, many first-year students struggle to adjust to college life. These developmentally-appropriate challenges often lead to students feeling stresses or overwhelmed, which can quickly escalate to more significant mental health and well-being concerns.

### First-Year Students Face Challenges Right Away...

“Some students lack strategies to deal with small challenges, like disappointment and failure. We notice an increasing number coming to campus with that lack of skills and relying on ideation of hurting themselves as a way to cope. **Early interventions are critical to ensure they do not act on those urges.**”

*David Spano  
Associate Vice Chancellor, Student Affairs  
University of North Carolina Charlotte*

### ...And They Can Escalate Quickly

50%

Of first-year students report feeling **stressed** most or all of the time

35%

Of incoming first-year students frequently feel **anxious**

48%

Of students **present at the counseling center for anxiety**, 18 percentage points higher than for depression

Source: LeViness, Peter, Carolyn Bershada, and Kim Gorman. "Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors Annual Survey," 2018; Denizet-Lewis, Beniot. 2017. "[Why Are More American Teenagers Than Ever Suffering From Severe Anxiety?](#)". *New York Times*, 2017; Eagan, M. K., Stolzenberg, E. B., Zimmerman, H. B., Aragon, M. C., Whang Sayson, H., & Rios-Aguilar, C. (2017). The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2016. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA; Jed Foundation. [Students Who Feel Emotionally Unprepared for College More Likely to Report Poor Academic Performance and Negative College Experience](#). 2015; EAB interviews and analysis.

# Everyone Faces Challenges in the First Year

## Resilience Impacts How Students Respond and What Happens Next

Students' resilience and coping skills influence their behaviors when responding to setbacks and impact the outcome of challenging scenarios. Generally, students with low resilience and coping skills withdraw and often see their concerns escalate, while students with high resilience and coping skills seek help from peers or campus resources and persevere through challenges.

<b>Common Roadblock</b>	<i>"I miss my family and haven't made good friends."</i>	<i>"I failed my first test in a required class."</i>
<b>Student With Low Resilience/Coping Skills</b>	<b>Behavior</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stays in room, increases time on social media</li> <li>• Worries that he doesn't belong at this institution</li> <li>• Goes home on the weekends</li> </ul> <b>Outcome</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not return for second term</li> <li>• Lost tuition dollars</li> </ul>	<b>Behavior</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stops going to class</li> <li>• Worries that she doesn't belong at this institution</li> <li>• Becomes anxious about her other classes</li> </ul> <b>Outcome</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fails class and is placed on academic probation</li> <li>• GPA jeopardizes scholarship and planned major</li> </ul>
<b>Student with High Resilience/Coping Skills</b>	<b>Behavior</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talks with RA about ways to get involved</li> <li>• Joins campus group for improv</li> </ul> <b>Outcome</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Makes friends through improv group</li> <li>• Returns for second term</li> </ul>	<b>Behavior</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visits TA during office hours</li> <li>• Joins study group and realizes others are also struggling</li> <li>• Takes advantage of tutor offered through campus academic support office</li> </ul> <b>Outcome</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student passes course</li> <li>• Keeps GPA at 3.0 needed for entry to planned major</li> </ul>

# Prepare Students to Manage Setbacks in the First Year

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## Enhance Current Touchpoints with Resilience and Coping Skills

Proactive education helps students build the skills they need to navigate common challenges and prevent smaller concerns from escalating to more significant issues. EAB recommends institutions prime first-year students with resilience and coping skills, before they encounter a setback.

Most institutions have several touchpoints built into the first year that can be easily enhanced with resilience and coping skills, including orientation, common reading programs, and first-year experience courses. This paper outlines three recommendations for engaging first-year students in developing these essential skills.

### Road Map



#### **RECOMMENDATION 1**

Introduce Resilience Before Students Arrive On Campus



#### **RECOMMENDATION 2**

Extend the Conversation Throughout the First Year



#### **RECOMMENDATION 3**

Implement a Multi-Pronged Approach

# Pre-Semester Exercises Prepare Students for Challenges

## UT Austin's Growth Mindset Approach Strengthens Perseverance

Pre-semester exercises provide an opportunity to prepare students to encounter setbacks and introduce them to strategies or ways of thinking that will help them overcome challenges. At the University of Texas at Austin, psychological researcher David Yeager partnered with chemistry professor David Laude to introduce a an exercise students complete before arriving on campus to prime them with growth mindset concepts. Their intervention has been utilized and adapted by a number of institutions, many as part of research initiatives with Yeager's Mindset Scholars Network<sup>1</sup>.

### How University of Texas at Austin's Growth Mindset Exercise Works



#### Review Information on Growth Mindset

- Letters from other students
- Online modules about the ability to gain new skills and overcome challenges



#### Reflect on Personal Story of Overcoming Obstacles

- Essay on past struggles that the student has overcome
- Write a letter to the student's past self about resilience



#### Give Advice on Overcoming Challenges

- Record a video reflecting on what the student learned
- Write to a suggested high school student summarizing information from exercise

50%

Reduction in the gap in 12+ credit completion between underrepresented and majority<sup>2</sup> students

50%

Reduction in the GPA gap between African American and white graduates<sup>3</sup>

1) [Mindsetcholarsnetwork.org](http://Mindsetcholarsnetwork.org)

2) Underrepresented students defined as African American, Hispanic, and first-generation students (Tough, 2014)

3) Replication of growth mindset intervention at elite, northeastern private university

Source: Source: Paul Tough, "Who Gets to Graduate?", *The New York Times*, May 15, 2014; EAB interviews and analysis.

# Integrate Resilience Into Orientation

## The Potential and Limitations of Orientation Programs

Orientation presents a natural opportunity to prepare students for challenges before the start of their semester. Many institutions integrate resilience and coping skills into orientation through a range of events, including peer-led discussions, informational table activities, dedicated workshops, and online modules.

These orientation events are valuable in exposing students to key well-being concepts and skills, but they often do not go far enough. For example, students can be overwhelmed with new content at orientation or they might not yet understand the relevance or importance of these concepts and skills.

### A Range of Resilience Touchpoints at Orientation...



15-minute discussion on resilience with orientation leader



Table with stress balls and pamphlets about available resources



Orientation session on mental health services



Pre-orientation module with grit inventory

### ...But Concerns About Ongoing Impact Remain



Content Overload



Single Dose Lessons Don't Stick



Content Doesn't Resonate



Opt-in Required

# Extend the Conversation Beyond Orientation

## Susquehanna University Built Resilience Into Their Common Read Program

EAB recommends institutions extend conversations about resilience and coping skills beyond orientation to help students learn the content and skills they need to succeed on campus.

Susquehanna University used their common read program to extend messages about resilience and well-being beyond orientation and across the first semester. Using input from faculty, students, and staff, Susquehanna developed a reading list, curriculum, and series of events connected to resilience. Susquehanna's common read program reinforces messages from orientation and keeps resilience top-of-mind for students across the year.

### Use Input From Students, Faculty, and Staff...



Student committee generates list of topics



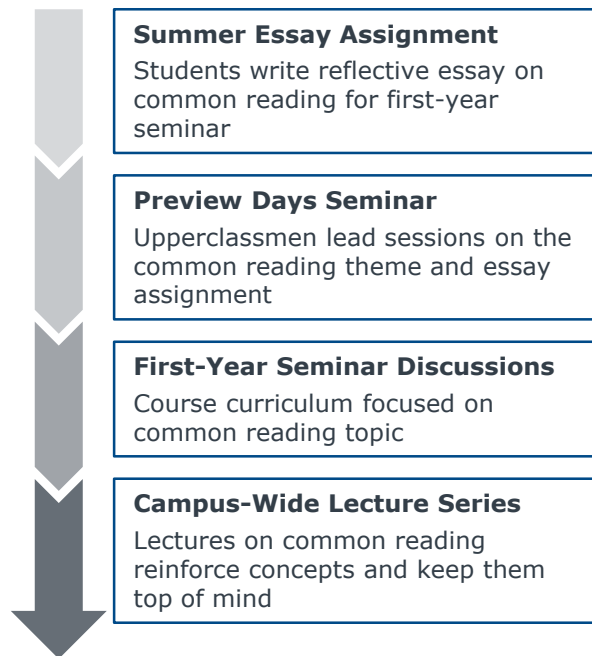
Faculty and staff vote on theme and nominate articles to include on reading list

### ...To Develop a Resilience-Themed Reading List

Anthology of 10-15 articles, ranging from excerpts of books on business to war memoirs, including:

- "On Campus, Failure is on the Syllabus"  
*Jessica Bennett*
- Excerpt from *Option B*  
*Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant*
- "Black Men Emerging"  
*Derrick R. Brooms*

### Theme and Skills Infused Across the First Semester



#### Summer Essay Assignment

Students write reflective essay on common reading for first-year seminar

#### Preview Days Seminar

Upperclassmen lead sessions on the common reading theme and essay assignment

#### First-Year Seminar Discussions

Course curriculum focused on common reading topic

#### Campus-Wide Lecture Series

Lectures on common reading reinforce concepts and keep them top of mind

A key benefit of a curated anthology approach is that it can incorporate diverse perspectives and types of material to resonate with students with varying backgrounds and interests. See the appendix for a full list of the materials Susquehanna incorporated into their resilience anthology.

# Implement a Multi-Pronged Approach

## CSU Long Beach’s College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics

Helping students build strong resilience and coping skills requires sustained attention and a mix of ongoing interventions. California State University Long Beach’s College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics recognized how students were struggling to cope with the rigorous academics and competitive cultures of their programs. To better support their students’ success, CSU Long Beach implemented a variety of broad-based and targeted strategies to reinforce resilience and coping skills across the academic year.

### Broad-Based Strategies



Peer-led “Safari to Success” breakout **orientation session** focuses on adopting a growth mindset

**Syllabus statements** encourage students to seek help

**First-year seminar** integrates growth mindset into curriculum

### Targeted Strategies



Academic **advisors check in** with first-year students who failed midterms to connect with resources

**Peer mentors** trained to use growth mindset language and recognize academic warning signs

### Keys to Success



Multiple efforts ensure that students receive **timely** support



Initiative has secured **departmental support** from staff, faculty, and upperclassmen



Advising team **proactively** identifies at-risk students and intervenes



# How EAB Can Help

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## Research and Resources to Guide Your Next Steps

Priming first-year students with coping and resilience skills is one component of a broader strategy for supporting students' success and well-being. To equip institutions with the information they need to better manage the escalating demand for campus mental health services and support, EAB offers several white papers, tools, on-demand webinars, and more. Members can access, download, and order hardcopies of these and related resources at [eab.com](http://eab.com).

### *Selected Resources from EAB*



#### **Building Stakeholder Awareness**

- Managing the Escalating Demand for Mental Health and Well-Being Support
- Expanding Well-Being Initiatives Through Faculty Partnerships
- Growing Investments in Campus Well-Being Supports



#### **Meeting the Escalating Demand for Mental Health Services**

- Setting and Communicating a Sustainable Scope of Service
- How to Maximize Clinical Support on Campus
- Serving High-Need Students: Expanding Referral Networks and Support



#### **Developing Resilience and Coping Skills to Advance Student Success**

- Nudging Students Towards Resilient Behaviors
- Targeting Proactive Interventions to Key Student Segments
- Centralizing Mental Health and Well-Being Intake



# Appendix

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- Reading List from Susquehanna University's Resilience Anthology

# Susquehanna University's Resilience Anthology

## From the 2018-2019 Common Reading Program *Perspectives On Resilience*

EAB recommends institutions extend conversations about resilience and coping skills throughout that critical first year to help students learn the content and skills they need to succeed on campus.

Susquehanna University used their common read program to extend messages about resilience and well-being across the first semester. Using input from faculty, students, and staff, Susquehanna developed a resilience-themed anthology, curriculum, and series of events. Each excerpt or article in the anthology was prefaced by a brief introduction from a Susquehanna faculty or staff member with their personal reflections on the material and theme. Students read the anthology over the summer and wrote a reflective first-person essay. Once on campus, upperclassman peer leaders facilitated discussions on the essays and material during preview days, and first-year seminar professors incorporated the content into their curriculum. A campus-wide lecture series featuring anthology authors reinforced resilience throughout the semester.

A key benefit of a curated anthology approach is that it can incorporate diverse perspectives and types of material to resonate with students with varying backgrounds and interests. Take a look at the range of material Susquehanna assembled for their anthology below:

## Perspectives On Resilience

Susquehanna University Common Reading, 2018-2019

### **Introduction: Permission Slip to Fail**

Samantha Proffitt, Susquehanna University  
Director of Academic Achievement and First-Year Experience

### **"On Campus, Failure Is on the Syllabus" [\[link\]](#)**

Jessica Bennet  
*The New York Times*; June 6, 2017

### **Introduction and Breathing Again**

Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant  
Book excerpts from [Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy](#) (2017) [\[link\]](#)

### **En La Calle San Sebastián**

Martín Espada  
From [Alabanza: New and Selected Poems, 1982-2002](#) (2004) [\[link\]](#)

### **"Why Some People Are More Resilient Than Others" [\[link\]](#)**

Denise Cummins  
*Psychology Today*; March 11, 2015

### **"Gender Equality, Resilience to Climate Change, and the Design of Livestock Projects for Rural Livelihoods" [\[link\]](#)**

Nicola J.C. Chanamuto and Stephen J.G. Hall  
Study excerpt from *Gender & Development, an Oxfam Journal; Volume 23 – Issue 3: Resilience* (2015)

# Susquehanna University's Resilience Anthology (cont...)

From The 2018-2019 Common Reading Program *Perspectives On Resilience*

## **"The Plot Twist: E-Book Sales Slip, and Print is Far From Dead" [\[link\]](#)**

Alexander Alter

*The New York Times*; September 22, 2015

## ***Resilience in Immigrant and Refugee Families***

Jennifer Doty

Anthology excerpt from Immigrant and Refugee Families: Global Perspectives on Displacement and Resettlement Experiences (2016) [\[link\]](#)

## **Letters from WWI Soldier Désiré Edmond Renault**

Translated by Amanda DuCharme, Susquehanna University Class of 2017

## ***Black Men Emerging: Experiencing Self In College and Engaging Resiliency***

Derrick R. Brooms

Book excerpt from Being Black, Being Male on Campus: Understanding and Confronting Black Male Collegiate Experiences (2017) [\[link\]](#)

## **"The Profound Emptiness of 'Resilience'" [\[link\]](#)**

Parul Sehgal

*The New York Times Magazine*; December 1, 2015

## ***Resilience: Surfing the Waves with Style***

Holly B. Rogers

Book excerpt from The Mindful Twenty-Something: Life Skills to Handle Stress...and Everything Else (2016) [\[link\]](#)

## ***Love What You Do***

Cal Ripken, Jr. and Donald T. Phillips

Book excerpt from Get in the Game: 8 Elements of Perseverance That Make the Difference (2008) [\[link\]](#)

# Student Affairs Forum

## Project Director

Lindsay Kubaryk

## Contributing Consultants

Hailey Badger  
Elizabeth Brown  
Murphy Donohue  
Alex Polyak

## Managing Director

Liz Rothenberg, PhD

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