First Year Student Resilience as a Factor in Retention and Engagement

Dr Merrelyn Bates
Mr Toby Miles-Johnson
School of Criminology and Criminal Justice
Griffith University

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Abstract

There is a limited literature related to the links between resilience and transition for first year students. In Criminology and Criminal Justice, students enter careers identified as high stress employment sectors, e.g. child safety, policing, and corrections and it is important to incorporate into our teaching, strategies that will build resilience for success in these challenging employment sectors. In order to do this we need to understand the resilience factors that our students bring or do not bring to the beginning of their studies. In semester one of 2010, the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice investigated the resilience attributes that first year students had brought to their studies. This project involved both pre- and post- surveys as well as focus groups and individual student interviews. The data presented here will provide a summary of our findings and highlight the strategies identified as being useful in resilience building.

The School of Criminology and Criminal Justice offers a broad-based social science degree including the humanities, psychology and legal disciplines. It has four double degrees that involve law, psychology, forensic science, and human services. Its post-graduate offerings have also been expanding to include Graduate Certificates, Masters, Masters with Honours, and PhDs. Its student body totals nearly 3000 students.

Griffith University, at an institutional level, has been committed to improving the transition process of first year students, irrespective of whether they are coming from school or moving into higher education as a mature-age student. Since 2004 there has been a commitment from the University's Executive to provide support for not only the implementation of appropriate strategies but also for the ongoing evaluation of such strategies. As a result, there have been a number of studies that have been consistently contributing to data collection that has informed our understanding of student transition, e.g. 'Starting@Griffith' survey.

A number of understandings have been developed as a result of these studies. This has included the importance of Lizzio's (2006, pp. 2-3) framework called *The 'Five Senses' of Successful Transition*, which emphasises the importance of students having a sense of capability, a sense of connectedness, a sense of purpose, a sense of resourcefulness, and a sense of academic culture. A more recent study by Lizzio (2010) has identified that students report their ability to achieve is guided by their 'time on task'.

This early information provided a strong culture of engagement with first year students in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice through a range of strategies developed by the First Year Advisor in conjunction with the First Year Management Team. This team included

all the first year course convenors, University learning advisors, relevant administration staff – including staff from disabilities office and the GUMURRI centre – Head of School, and other relevant staff as required. Ultimately, the strategies developed improved the retention rate from 64.5% to 71.2% and decreased the attrition rate from 28.4% to 23.4% across a three-year period. This is an excellent result in the Arts field.

Since the inception of the strategies to support first year students, the authors have been intrigued by the importance of resilience as a factor in student successful transition. Resilience is a component that is not only important for transition into University but also through university life and then the transition from university into the world of work. It has been defined as the 'means used to maintain adjustment by reducing the otherwise noxious effects imposed by unfortunate life experience' (Cohler, Stott et al. 1995p. 754). This allows for a perspective of how protective factors, such as coping mechanisms, environmental support, and personal characteristics contribute to an individual's propensity to manage change and problem-solve through unexpected challenges. Resilience is predicated at the three levels of individual attributes, family and cultural influences; an adequate emotional expressive ability, supportive family relations, good peer relations and pro-sociality promote protective factors for an easier transition into the demands of higher education. As these protective factors decrease the risk of the individual's resilience being compromised is increased.

Clay and Silberberg (2004) proposed that both protective and risk factors can be further broken down into external supports, supports, and personal and interpersonal skills. They were able to categorise the qualities that could be found in each section, e.g. in protective factors: positive social interactions with other people is an external support, having hope and optimism is an support, and being able to problem solve demonstrates the degree of personal and interpersonal skills that can be drawn upon; in the risk factors: a lack of social support from family or friends is an external risk, sensation seeking is an risk factor, and poor communication skills also contribute to an increase in the risk factors to effective resilience.

This paper is reporting on a pilot research project conducted during semester one of this year. Its purpose was to establish baseline data that identified the attributes of resilience that students had or didn't have as they began and progressed through the beginning of their studies. The project provides data on the personal factors that have assisted these students to transition through their first semester of study as well as help identify the idiosyncratic characteristics that have allowed them to overcome (or not overcome) disappointments and unexpected challenges in the early days of being a student. It is proposed that this initiative will be stage 1 of a proposed longitudinal project that will identify the value of embedding resilience across the curriculum.

Methodology

A mixed methods approach has been chosen to complete this research. A survey of students, both and external, has been conducted during their first week of classes. The survey was designed from Clay and Silberberg's (2004) conceptualisation of protective factors that build resilience and risk factors that diminish it.

During the semester, as part of the first year support strategies, students who were identified as being 'at risk' were interviewed. The information collected assisted in identifying the circumstances that contributed to the 'at risk' identification, e.g. fail assessment, not attending

class, etc. Students who withdrew from university study during this semester were contacted with a survey to help identify factors that contributed to the decision to leave. As the objective of this project is to identify the factors that contribute to resilience or lack of resilience in our first year students in CCJ, we also conducted a focus group with high achieving students as well. This qualitative data is being analysed thematically to identify the resilience aspects that can be occurring in the student group. All the data will be collated as part of a review of the current strategies being used as well as highlighting the strategies that may further build the resilience attributes for students as they move through the degree.

The initial survey was targeted to first year CCJ students attending two first year courses on campus. This limited student involvement to only CCJ degree students who were enrolled in one of five CCJ degree programs. Ethics approval has been sought and received (CCJ/20/09/HREC).

Results

The survey was administered to 327 students enrolled in two first year courses on campus. The final sample ($N = 320$) included 120 male (37.5%) and 200 female (62.5%) students. Seven participants were excluded from the final sample due to incomplete surveys.

The ages of the participants enrolled in the courses ranged from 17 to 55 years ($M = 19.73$, $SD = 4.97$). The majority of students ($n = 273$) identified as Caucasian (85.3%), with (4.4%) of students identifying as Aboriginal Australian or Torres Strait Islander ($n = 14$). Sixteen students (5%) identified as Asian, and 17 students (5.3%) chose the race identity option *Other* and then specified their race. Most of the students ($n = 287$) responded that English was their first language (89.7%), with 30 students (9.4%) responding that English was their second language, and only three students (.9%) reported that English was their third or more language.

The majority of students ($n = 221$, 69.1%) reported that they were a first time university student or school leaver. Fort-nine students (15.3%) indicated that they were re-enrolled students (either from full or part completion of a previous degree or enrolment), and 50 students (15.6%) responded that they were a mature age (and first-time) university student.

More than half of the students ($n = 164$, 51.3%) indicated that they did not know what they wanted to do as an occupation at the end of their degree or certificate. However, 48.7% ($n = 156$) of the students indicated that they did have an idea of where they saw their future employment: 18.4% of the students specified that they wanted to work as a police officer; 4.7% of the students specified that they wanted to work as a Lawyer; and 3.1% of students specified that they wanted to work in forensics. The rest of the students chose occupations that varied between other courses/fields of study and differing employment within the criminal justice system.

Before enrolling as a CCJ student, 52.2% ($n = 167$) of the students stated that they had not completed any previous study; 22.2% ($n = 71$) of the students indicated that they had completed Year 12; and 7.2% ($n = 23$) of the students said that they had completed a Diploma of Justice Administration. The rest of the students ($n = 59$, 18.4%) specified that they had completed other types of study which ranged from studying for one semester at university to full completion of a university degree, and the completion of TAFE diplomas and certificates.

The majority of students ($n = 191$, 59.7%) indicated that they were single, with only 35% ($n = 112$) of students reporting that they were in a relationship. Only 10 students (3.1%) reported that they were in a relationship with children, and only seven students (2.2%) reported that they were a single parent with a child or children.

External Risk Factors

Initial analysis of the results indicated that some students reported a lack of social support from family ($n = 23$, 7.2%), school ($n = 24$, 7.5%) and friends ($n = 14$, 4.4%). With 47 students (14.7%) reporting that they did not believe that they had a happy childhood and 28 students (8.8%), stating that their family was not emotionally close and did not support them.

More than a quarter of the students ($n = 82$, 25.6) stated that they did not know anyone at university, with 5% of students reporting that they did not have supportive friends outside of university life. A few students indicated that there was a lack of support from their wider community ($n = 3$, .9%), while the majority of students ($n = 199$, 62.2%) reported that they did not belong to a community group or did not belong to a religion, church or faith ($n = 244$, 76.3%). Although seven students (2.2%) who did report that they belonged to a religion, church, or faith indicated that their particular religion church or faith did not support them.

Many students reported that they were not employed ($n = 95$, 29.7%), and less than a quarter of students ($n = 36$, 11.3%) indicated that their employment was not supportive of their university education. Although more than half of the students reported that they were living at home with their parents ($n = 191$, 59.7%), some students reported that they were living on their own ($n = 10$, 3.1%), or in shared accommodation ($n = 47$, 14.7%) and therefore at high risk of neglect and transience (Clay & Silberg, 2004).

Internal Risk Factors

Initial analysis of the results indicated that some students were not excited to be enrolled at university ($n = 10$, 3.1%) and that a number of students ($n = 28$, 8.8%) expressed their doubts about being a student at university. Many students indicated that they had a lack of future orientation, with 15 students (4.7%) reporting that they did not know if they were happy to begin the pathway towards their chosen degree. Thirty-five students (10.9%) stated that they did not know if they were full of optimism, hope and aspiration for the future, while 31 students (9.7%) indicated a lack of future orientation. In addition, 51 students (15.9%) stated that they believed that they lacked control of the events in their lives, indicating a lack of coping strategies (Clay and Silberg 2004).

A small number of students reported a poor sense of self worth, with 5 students (1.6%) stating that they did not have a good sense of humour, and 47 students (14.7%) reporting that they are highly-strung. Although the majority of students reported having good health ($n = 302$, 94.4%), a number of students ($n = 18$, 5.6%) reported having poor health; 58 students (18.1%) indicated that they had poor nutrition.

Personal and Interpersonal Risk Factors

Many students ($n = 92$, 28.8%) reported that they avoided conflicts, with 15 students (4.7%) stating that they have an inability to resolve conflicts effectively. In addition, 63 students (19.7%) reported that they had concerns about their communication skills. Sixty six students

(20.6%) reported concerns about their poor problem solving skills. Furthermore, 13 students (4.1%) were unable to think of other possibilities when problems arose, and a small number of students ($n = 8$, 2.5%), reported having negative social interactions with other people. Although the majority of students ($n = 258$, 80.6%) reported having goal oriented strategies, in total, 24 students (7.5%) indicated that they were not self motivated, and 38 students (11.9%) reported that they did not know if they were self motivated.

Future Plans

These initial results have given us a starting point. The processes of identifying the 'at risk' students are commencing, so we will be beginning to interview the individual students who are detected as being part of this group. We would envisage that this data collection method will continue during April and May with interviews of high achieving students at the end of May or beginning of June.

Conclusion

Improving the retention and engagement of students is a strategic goal of the University. There is a growing literature in the area of first year transition in relation to retention and engagement, but there is limited literature related to the links between transition processes and resilience building. Given that many CCJ students enter careers identified as high stress employment sectors, e.g. child safety, policing, corrections, it is essential that by understanding the factors contributing to resilience and transition during study, links may be able to be made to assisting resilience building for transition into the more challenging employment sectors.

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