Resilience in Post-Secondary Students: The Role of Academic Advisor Support

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Resilience serves as a powerful protective factor against a range of negative physical and psychological health outcomes and has much value for college students who are vulnerable to an increased number of stressors. Thus, universities should explore ways to aid students in building resilience, particularly through academic advising. In this study, we hypothesized that increased levels of perceived advisor support would predict increased levels of resilience. Regression analyses demonstrated that perceived advisor support significantly predicted resilience, surpassing the influence of psychological distress. Additionally, a bivariate correlation analysis identified vital aspects of the advisor-advisee relationship that may encourage resiliency. We discuss implications and strategies academic advisors may implement to facilitate a positive advisor-advisee relationship and build resiliency in their students.

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Academic advising is a fundamental component of student success (Curtin et al., 2013; Ferris et al., 2012; Nutt, 2003; Tippetts et al., 2022; Young-Jones et al., 2013). Various student qualities impact academic performance and retention; resilience is one protective factor against a range of negative physical and psychological health outcomes (Harker et al., 2016). Resilience is valuable for students in higher education who are vulnerable to an increased number of stressors including finances, social integration, and academic achievement (Stallman, 2010). These benefits demonstrate the need for universities to explore ways to aid the student population in building resilience, particularly through academic advising.

Resilience

The American Psychological Association (2018) describes resilience as "the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands." An increasing emphasis has been placed on the role of resilience in mediating the relationship between stress and mental health (Herrman et al., 2011); in particular, resilience has been negatively correlated with, and may serve as a protective factor against, psychological distress and its ensuing detrimental consequences (Harker et al., 2016; Southwick et al., 2014).

McGillivray and Pidgeon (2015) explored this relationship further by administering the Resilience Scale (RS-14), the Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale (DASS-21), and the Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (FMI) to a sample of Australian university students. The results demonstrated that higher levels of resilience significantly correlated with lower levels of psychological distress, and vice versa. In addition, resiliency led to greater levels of mindfulness, another factor which aids in managing levels of psychological distress (Harker et al., 2016). This exemplifies the multidimensional way in which resilience helps lower levels of psychological distress, specifically in the student population.

Developing resiliency throughout student populations can protect against psychological distress and improve academic performance. For example, Dwiastuti et al. (2022) examined academic resilience and academic performance in university students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results indicated that students with high academic resilience had 1.73 times higher odds of improving academic performance compared to those with lower resilience. This finding suggests that students with increased levels of resilience are more equipped to persevere and overcome

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academic obstacles. Subsequently, resilience may act as a mediator between psychological distress and academic performance (Hart, 2019).

Given these results, universities should further examine ways to aid students in developing resilience. While some factors involved in individual resilience levels are biological or developmental, other aspects can be strengthened with social support, accessibility to mental health resources, educational courses and seminars, and high-quality academic advising (Eisenberg et al., 2016; Herrman et al., 2011). For instance, Ramos (2019) highlighted the importance of mentorship in building resilience in first-generation students of color. Not only do mentors act as caring individuals on campus, they also serve as a "safety net" for students while encouraging autonomy and personal growth. Universities could implement mentorships in a variety of ways, such as through academic advising.

The Advisor-Student Relationship

Traditionally, academic advisors assist students with exploring life and vocational goals, program choice(s), course options, and classes schedules (O'Banion, 1994). However, the role of academic advisors is expanding to include other aspects of student growth. Ferris et al. (2012) identified four key roles present in successful advisor-student relationships: Advisors (1) mentor their students and provide guidance while also encouraging independent learning; (2) are teachers and provide knowledge and expertise on important topics; (3) motivate their students and encourage them to take on new and difficult challenges and; (4) are well versed in university policy and procedures and have expertise in how to navigate these university procedures.

Numerous studies demonstrated the benefits of successful advisor-student relationships (Curtin et al., 2013; Ferris et al., 2012; Nutt, 2003; Tippetts et al., 2022; Young-Jones et al., 2013). Pargett (2011) found that academic advising significantly correlated to students' university satisfaction and development. Mu and Fosnacht (2019) reported similar results, revealing that positive academic advising experiences lead to greater self-perceived gains, as well as better grades.

Students who meet with their academic advisor at least once per semester are more likely to reenroll and show significantly higher levels of perceived support compared with students who do not meet with their academic advisor at all (Tippetts et al., 2022; Young-Jones et al., 2013). When meeting with an advisor, advisor accountability (i.e., professionalism and availability expected from advisees) and advisor empowerment (i.e., facilitation and guidance expected from advisees) contributed to improved student responsibility, self-efficacy, study skills, and perceived support (Young-Jones et al., 2013). Thus, the significance of the advisor-student relationship cannot be overstated, especially when considering the implications for student retention and academic success.

Student Departure

While retention rates increased over the last two decades, only 46.6% of four-year institution students will graduate within a four-year time span and only 63.4% will graduate within six years (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Given the benefits that attaining a college degree presents both to the individual and to society (Chan, 2016; Long, 2018; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023), it is imperative for academic advisors to know why students leave and the ensuing ways they can positively impact student retention and success.

To help explain why students leave before graduating, Tinto (1993) constructed a Model of Student Departure which outlined three primary causes: (1) academic difficulties; (2) the inability of students to resolve their educational and occupational goals; and (3) their failure to remain incorporated in the institution's intellectual and social life (Shaw, 2018; Tinto, 1993). Overall, Tinto theorized that students who successfully integrate into the social and academic life of their educational institutions were more likely to remain at that institution than peers who were unable to integrate (Tinto, 1993).

Since Tinto's development of the Student Departure Model, subsequent studies focused on identifying the primary causes for low college retention rates and methods universities can implement to raise these rates. Bernardo et al. (2016) surveyed 1,311 college freshmen regarding demographic, educational, social, and institutional information and compared responses from students who were dropping out to those who were staying. These results echoed Tinto's Theory of Student Departure: students who were well-adapted to their educational institution were more likely to continue with their studies. Other variables linked to student attrition include poor class attendance, less time spent studying, and

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poor use of study techniques. Additional factors that contribute to higher rates of student departure include financial constraints, demands from employment, lack of instructor bonding and mentoring, a sense of not belonging, falling behind academically, and family demands (Clifton, 2021). Psychological distress has become increasingly important to study, as it negatively impacts student retention and academic performance (Stallman, 2010). The influence of psychological distress on college students is even more prescient in the wake of COVID-19 (Schmits et al., 2021).

Psychological Distress

Psychological distress can be defined as "the unique discomforting, emotional state experienced by an individual in response to a specific stressor or demand that results in harm, either temporary or permanent, to the person" (Ridner, 2004, p. 539). Walker and Avant (1995) described five defining attributes of psychological distress to differentiate it from similar constructs: (1) perceived inability to cope effectively, (2) change in emotional status, (3) discomfort, (4) communication of discomfort, and (5) harm. These features parallel the three primary sources of student departure in Tinto's Model, demonstrating the overlap between psychological distress and student departure.

College students are particularly susceptible to psychological distress due to elevated financial, social, and academic stress. Research suggests that over 80% of college students report increased psychological distress levels, compared to 29% in the general population (Stallman, 2010). Such self-reported distress levels have been on the rise over the last decade and continue to be affected by factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Burke et al., 2020; Daly & Robinson, 2021; Knapstad et al., 2021). For example, the increase in online learning, along with the fear of losing an academic year due to the pandemic, has significantly increased students' psychological distress levels (Hasan & Bao, 2020). These trends are concerning given the negative physical, mental, and academic effects increased levels of psychological distress can have on students.

Stallman (2010) identified a similar trend with students reporting higher levels of psychological distress linked with a reduced capacity for studying and academic related tasks, as well as lower GPAs. These results are supported by Vivekananda et al. (2011), who found that psychological distress negatively impacts student academic functioning and productivity while increasing the drop-out risks.

Several factors have been shown to lower psychological distress levels in both the general and student populations. For instance, higher levels of mindfulness and social support predict lower levels of psychological distress (Bore et al., 2016; Harker et al., 2016). However, resilience is one of the most commonly reported protective factors of psychological distress (Bacchi & Licinio, 2017; Harker et al., 2016; McGillivray & Pidgeon, 2015). Universities that identify methods to assist students in increasing resilience may lower psychological distress and mitigate the numerous negative implications associated with it.

Present Research

Given the research on the impact of resilience on mediating psychological distress and aiding in academic performance and retention, academic advisors who work closely with students should implement techniques to help students build resilience. Overall, this study aimed to examine the relationship between perceived advisor support, resilience, and psychological distress. We hypothesized that resilience will be negatively correlated with psychological distress, with higher levels of resilience leading to lower levels of psychological distress. We also predicted that higher levels of perceived advisor support will predict increased levels of resilience.

Methods

Participants

A total of 136 participants from an Introductory Psychology course met the inclusion requirements for this study. Participants were excluded if they did not complete the entire survey ($n = 38$), provided identical or nearly identical responses to every survey question ($n = 2$), were under 18 years of age ($n = 2$), or did not provide an age ($n = 2$). Out of the 136 eligible participants, all were 18 years and older ($M = 19.58$, $SD = 3.91$); 34 were male (25%), 101 were female (74.3%), and one self-described as non-binary (0.7%). Participants were primarily classified as undergraduate first year students (60.3%), with 27.9% being sophomores, and the remaining participants identifying as juniors or seniors. Approximately 83.1% ($n = 113$) of the sample were White and Non-Hispanic in ethnicity, with 79.3% ($n = 107$) of the sample identifying as straight/heterosexual. The

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average self-reported GPA was 3.53 ($SD = 0.47$). The sample was taken from a Midwestern university with an enrollment of approximately 15,000 students.

While the majority of the Fall 2020 semester sample was in their first year, all participants should have met with their academic advisor at least once before taking the survey. Incoming students were required to meet with a professional academic advisor prior to attending the university. They were also required to meet with a professional or faculty advisor (depending on the student's major) at least once during their first semester. The university utilizes a shared advising structure. While all advisors receive the same training, each advisor and advisement center uses different models (i.e., supplementary or split models; Pardee, 2004). Since participants were in a general education course, they represent a variety of academic departments which utilize various advising methods. Depending on the area of study, students are immediately matched with a faculty advisor, assigned to an advisement center, or begin with an advisement center and switch to a faculty advisor. For the purposes of this study, students were asked general questions about experiences with their advisor (see Perceived Advisor Support Scale [PASS] description below).

Measures

The survey included the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC-10), the Perceived Advisor Support Scale (PASS), Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale-21 Item (DASS-21), and a demographic questionnaire. Scales were counterbalanced to avoid order effects, with the demographic questionnaire administered last. This research was part of a larger study which included questionnaires not listed.

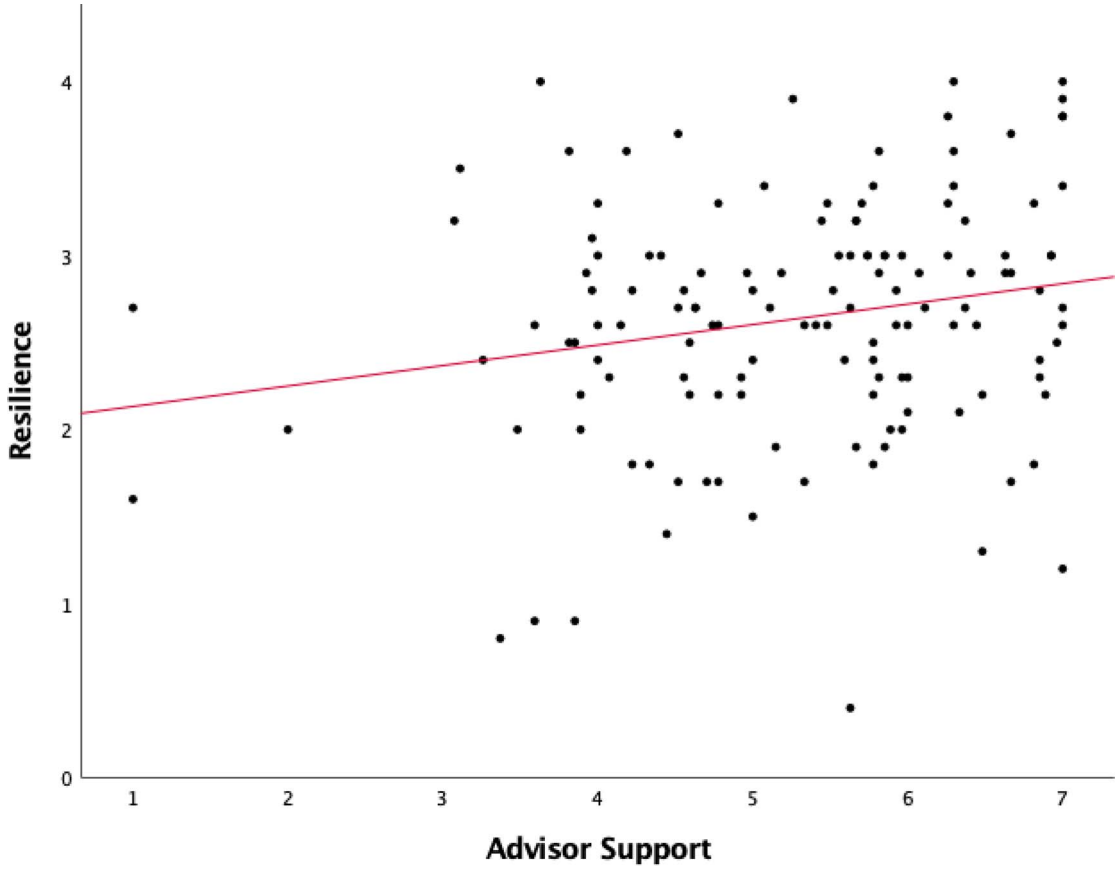
The Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC; Connor & Davidson, 2003) is a commonly used instrument for measuring levels of resilience. In its full structure, the CD-RISC is composed of 25 items utilizing a 5-point Likert-type scale format. For the purposes of this study, the abbreviated version of the CD-RISC, known as the CD-RISC-10, was administered. This abbreviated scale retains the original Likert structure, with answers ranging from 0 (*not true at all*) to 4 (*true nearly all the time*). Items include topics on hardiness and persistence, for example, "Can deal with whatever comes" and "Able to adapt to change." Following completion of the survey, items are added together, with higher scores indicating higher levels of resilience. The 10-item scale has been tested in a variety of populations including samples who reported history of childhood trauma and psychiatric symptoms. Individuals who scored higher on the CD-RISC-10 displayed lower overall psychiatric symptoms regardless of a significant trauma history. This finding indicates that the CD-RISC-10 has high construct validity as resilience is known for protecting against the effects of stress and trauma; it also has consistently high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$; Campbell-Sills & Stein, 2007).

The Perceived Advisor Support Scale (PASS; Burt et al., 2013) measured students' perceived support from their academic advisors. The PASS is a 27-item survey that measures factors related to autonomy, relatedness, and engagement. Items are set up as statements such as, "My advisor answers my questions fully and carefully," "My advisor provides me with choices and options," and "My advisor encourages me to get involved." Responses are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), with again higher scores indicating higher levels of perceived advisor support. This scale has been utilized for both traditional and non-traditional students, and its factors show strong reliabilities (Cronbach's $\alpha = .95$, .93, and .89, respectively; Burt et al., 2013).

The Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale-21 Item (DASS-21; Antony et al., 1998; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) is a shortened version of a 42-item scale used to measure the negative emotional states of depression, anxiety, and stress. Responses are given on a 4-point Likert-scale ranging from 0 (*did not apply to me at all*) to 3 (*applied to me very much or most of the time*). The 21-item scale consists of 7 items devoted to each factor (Anxiety = 2, 4, 7, 9, 15, 19, 20; Depression = 3, 5, 10, 13, 16, 17, 21; Stress = 1, 6, 8, 11, 12, 14, 18). Adding the designated items together creates a quantifiable score for each factor. The DASS-21 demonstrated exceptional reliability scores across studies with a wide range of populations (Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$, .87, and .91 respectively for the anxiety, depression, and stress factors). Concurrent validity between the DASS-21 and scales measuring similar constructs have moderately high correlations, indicating adequate validity (Antony et al., 1998; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995).

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Figure 1. Correlations Between Resilience and Perceived Advisor Support



Note. This figure depicts the positive correlation between PASS scores of perceived advisor support and RISC scores of resilience.

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Procedure

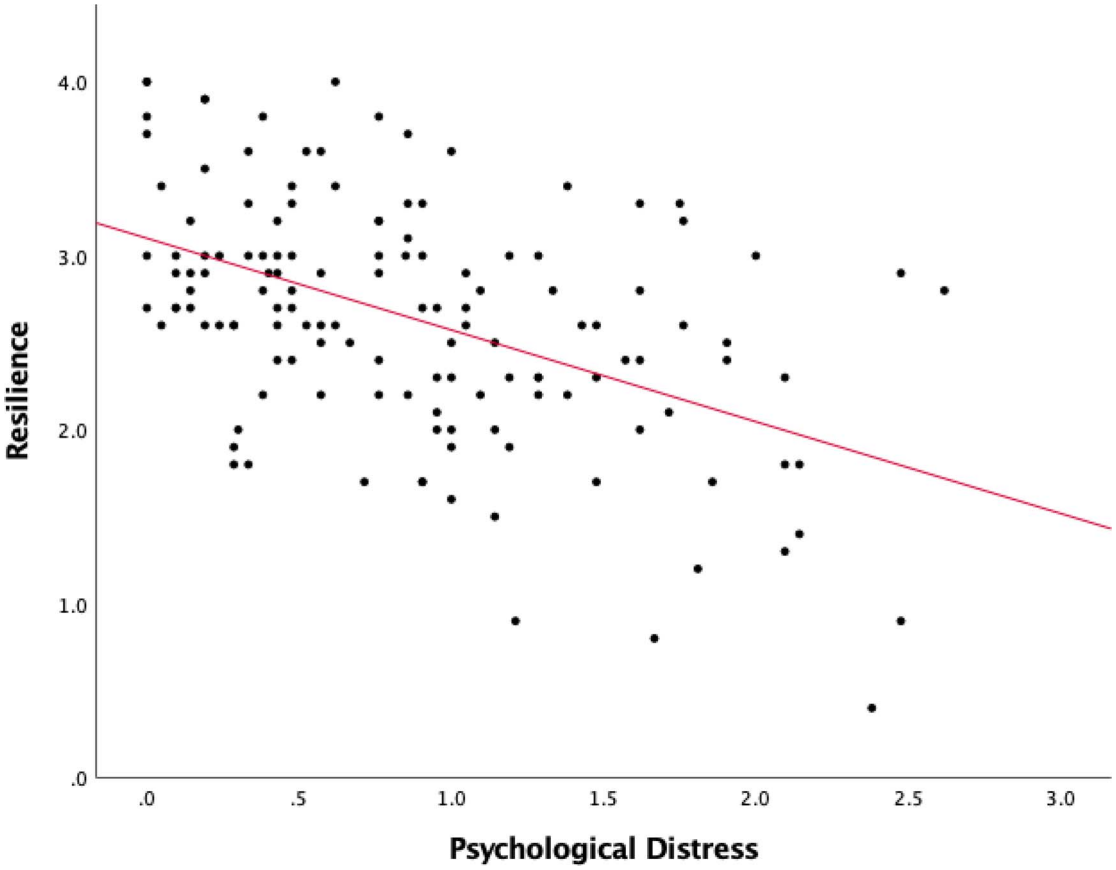
To obtain the sample for this IRB-approved study, instructors for a variety of Introductory Psychology courses notified their students of this research opportunity and gave them the option to receive research credit for their participation. Students signed up to participate via SONA-Systems (linked to Qualtrics), a secure online study management system. After accessing the survey link, participants provided informed consent prior to completing the study.

Results

To examine the relationship between perceived advisor support and resilience, a Pearson-product moment correlation revealed a significant positive correlation between resilience and perceived advisor support, $r(134) = .21$, $p < .05$ (See Figure 1). In addition, a simple linear regression was conducted using the PASS scores as the predictor variable and CD-RISC-10 scores as the outcome variable. Results indicated that perceived advisor support was statistically significant in predicting levels of resilience ($b = 0.21$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.21], $p < .05$). Overall, perceived advisor support predicted approximately 4% of the variability in resilience ($R^2 = 0.04$, $F(1, 134) = 5.93$, $p < .05$).

The relationship between resilience, psychological distress, and perceived advisor support was also examined. As expected, a significant negative correlation appeared between resilience and perceived psychological distress,

Figure 2. Correlations Between Psychological Distress and Resilience



Note. This figure depicts the negative correlation between DASS-21 scores of psychological distress and RISC scores of resilience.

$r(134) = -.48$, $p < .001$ (See Figure 2), indicating that as resilience increased, psychological distress decreased. However, the correlation between perceived psychological distress and perceived advisor support was not significant, $r(134) = -.07$, $p = .40$. A simple linear regression revealed that resilience significantly predicted psychological distress ($b = -0.48$, 95% CI [−.58, −.31], $p < .001$), with resilience accounting for approximately 23% of the variability in psychological distress levels ($R^2 = .23$, $F(1, 134) = 40.99$, $p < .001$). At the individual level, resilience was significantly negatively correlated with all three factors in the DASS-21, depression, $r(134) = -.47$, $p < .001$, anxiety, $r(134) = -.40$, $p < .001$, and stress, $r(134) = -.42$, $p < .001$.

To investigate the impact of perceived advisor support, along with levels of depression, anxiety, and stress on resiliency, a hierarchal multiple regression was conducted using RISC scores as the dependent variable and DASS-21 and PASS scores as the independent variables (See Table 1). DASS-21 scores were entered in step one, and PASS scores were entered in step two. Similar to the impacts of perceived advisor support, the DASS-21 was also a significant predictor of resilience, $R^2 = .23$, $F(1, 134) = 40.99$, $p < .001$. Adding PASS scores in step two strengthened the model, surpassing the effects of psychological distress on resilience. Overall, the model with both predictors was statistically significant and accounted for approximately 26% of the variability in resilience,

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Table 1. Psychological Distress and Perceived Advisor Support on Resilience

Variable	*B*	*SEB*	*t*	*p*	R^2 Change
Step 1					
Psychological Distress (DASS-21)	−0.527	0.082	−6.402	<.001	0.234
Step 2					
Psychological Distress (DASS-21)	−0.514	0.081	−6.318	<.001	
Perceived Advisor Support (PASS)	0.098	0.043	2.297	.023	0.029

Note. A hierarchal regression was utilized to examine the effects of psychological distress and perceived advisor support on resilience. Psychological distress was entered in step one, with perceived advisor support being added in step two.

$R^2 = .26$, $F(2, 133) = 23.79$, $p < .001$. This finding indicates that perceived advisor support—combined with depression, anxiety, and stress levels—has a significant effect on resilience, and that the two predictors combined predict resilience above and beyond that of psychological distress alone.

Finally, in order to understand how advisors can most effectively help build resilience in their advisees, a bivariate correlation was run between the individual items on the PASS and average resiliency scores. Of the 27 items on the scale, 17 were significantly positively correlated with resilience. Some of the most highly correlated items included, "My advisor notifies me of campus and community activities that support my goals," $r(134) = .23$, $p < .01$, "I feel like I have a choice about interacting with my advisor," $r(134) = .24$, $p < .01$, "My advisor encourages me to get involved," $r(134) = .26$, $p < .01$, and "My advisor tries to understand how I see things before suggesting a new way to do things," $r(134) = .19$, $p < .05$.

Discussion

Despite slight improvements in post-secondary retention over the last decade, high rates of student-departure continue to be a paramount issue facing higher education nationwide (Chan, 2016; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Students who are unable to integrate into the social and academic life of their university are more likely to drop out than those who integrate successfully (Tinto, 1993). Resilience aides this integration by potentially preventing psychological distress and the negative consequences associated with it (Harker et al., 2016; Stallman, 2010).

The current study examined how perceived academic advisor support influences resilience in the student population and establishes ways advisors can assist in building resilience in their advisees. Overall, study results support the initial hypotheses. Resilience was significantly, negatively correlated with psychological distress, which indicates that greater levels of resilience are associated with lower levels of psychological distress. Further analysis revealed that higher levels of resilience were predictive of lower levels of psychological distress, and that resilience was also negatively correlated with all three factors on the DASS-21: depression, anxiety, and stress. These results are consistent with Bacchi and Licinio's (2017) past research which found that higher levels of resilience linked to lower levels of reduced psychological distress in the student population.

The study confirmed the second hypothesis as well: increased levels of perceived advisor support were statistically significant in predicting higher levels of resilience. In addition, a hierarchal regression revealed that while psychological distress predicted levels of resilience, the model was strengthened when adding perceived advisor support to the analysis. This finding demonstrates that perceived advisor support and psychological distress levels combine to influence levels of resilience; it also suggests that academic advisors have the potential to play a key role in building resilience in the student population. Consequently, advisors can aid students in academic achievement, well-being, and, ultimately, increase student retention (Eisenberg et al., 2016).

Although this study offers a meaningful glance into the importance of the advisor-student relationship, some limitations exist. For instance, over 80% of the sample was White/Non-Hispanic in ethnicity, and three-fourths of the sample identified as female, thus, reducing generalizability. Additionally, many participants were first-year undergraduate students who should have met with an advisor at least once; notably, they all

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may not have formed meaningful advisor-student relationships.

Application Tips for Academic Advisors

Academic advising has been described as the "hub of the wheel" in terms of student services on campus (Nutt, 2003) and is associated with positive student outcomes, better grades, greater student responsibility, and greater self-efficacy (Mu & Fosnacht, 2019; Pargett, 2011; Young-Jones et al., 2013). This study provides additional evidence for the supportive role of advisors. Specifically, it indicates advisors may be able to encourage resiliency in their student advisees. To determine the best way for advisors to offer support to their students, the PASS items were further analyzed. Items such as "My advisor notifies me of campus and community activities that support my goals," "I can make choices among activities in order to complete degree requirements," and "I feel like I have a choice about interacting with this person," all highly correlated to resilience (Burt et al., 2013). The current finding provides insight into what qualities are most beneficial to students in terms of building resilience. Results are consistent with previous studies such as Ferris et al. (2012), which suggests that a successful advisor-student relationship is based on mentoring students by encouraging autonomy and independence.

Application Tip #1: *Encouraging autonomy and fostering a supportive environment that enhances the relationship between student and advisor is vital in building student resilience.*

Advisors can support students by providing a comfortable and accepting environment in which the student feels safe to discuss their thoughts, opinions, and concerns. This may be coupled with motivating students and encouraging them to take on new and difficult challenges, while guiding them through university policies and structures (Ferris et al., 2012). While academic advisors are not trained mental health professionals, they can recognize warning signs of psychological distress symptoms in students (i.e., excessive procrastination, decrease in quality of work, marked changes in behavior, absence from class) and refer them to campus resources (Harper & Peterson, 2005). The results further support the importance of having mentors on campus who can provide support and comfort, as well knowledge of campus resources (Ramos, 2019). Students informed about campus resources can better pursue outside support and build resiliency.

Application Tip #2: *Academic advisors should offer student support by familiarizing themselves with campus resources and having the insight to understand when a student requires resources outside their expertise.*

Over the past several years, psychological distress levels have been on the rise (Burke et al., 2020; Daly & Robinson, 2021; Harker et al., 2016; Hasan & Bao, 2020; Knapstad et al., 2021; Schmits et al., 2021; Southwick et al., 2014; Stallman, 2010; Vivekananda et al., 2011), and college enrollment has been declining (U. S. Department of Education, 2022). This trend is concerning considering the negative consequences associated with each, such as decreased life satisfaction and negative physical health outcomes (Ross & Wu, 1995; Tessler & Mechanic, 1978). However, resilience coincides with decreased psychological distress and greater university satisfaction and student success (Harker et al., 2016; Mu & Fosnacht, 2019). The results of this study indicate that not only is increased resilience significantly related to a decrease in levels of psychological distress, but also that academic advisors may play a crucial role in encouraging student resilience. Perceived advisor support offers one mechanism to help build student resiliency, provide a more satisfying college career, and enable future tools for success.

Application Tip #3: *Serving as a supportive individual on campus may mitigate challenging circumstances by increasing resilience and promoting student retention and well-being*.

Future Directions and Conclusion

The present study demonstrated the impact of perceived academic advisor support on the resilience of student advisees. Subsequent studies should examine a more diverse demographic, including a broader range of ethnicities, gender identities, and academic levels. Given the valuable implications of the relationship between perceived advisor support, psychological distress, and resilience, continued research in this area is necessary to maximize the benefits of academic advising for the student population. Future research could investigate specific interventions that advisors might implement to build resiliency in students, as well as practices to avoid. Finally, longitudinal research investigating how perceived advisor support and psychological distress impacts student

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retention over time may also provide deeper insight into how advising methods relate to Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1993).

These results highlight the important role of advisors in enhancing protective factors against psychological distress and fostering student well-being. Results informed the development of the application tips recommended for academic advisors who wish to help their students build resiliency. We recommend that academic advisors utilize these tips to encourage both resilience and academic/personal success in their student advisees.

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