

Supporting Faculty Resilience: Department Chairs' Role in Community Building Amid Trauma

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ABSTRACT

In the face of increasing major emergencies, higher education administrators must strategically recalibrate institutional policies and leadership practices to enhance resilience. While contemporary scholarship underscores the pivotal role of leaders in fostering resilience, further evidence is needed to understand this relationship within higher education, and the impact of department chairs on faculty resilience remains underexplored. This phenomenological study utilized semi-structured interviews with full-time instructional faculty to explore faculty's lived experiences during recurring traumatic events, COVID-19 and Hurricane Ian, at a public university in Southwest Florida, achieving data saturation through the depth and richness of the interviews. Themes emerged through constant comparative thematic analysis, revealing the significant role of department chairs in fostering faculty resilience. Positive leadership support strengthened resilience and community cohesion, while inadequate support weakened the relationship between faculty and the institution, thus impacting the resilience of the faculty and organization. These themes underscore the need for academic leaders to develop strategies that bolster faculty support, positioning department chairs as central to fostering and cultivating resilience in higher education.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, faculty, department chair, Hurricane Ian, resilience

Higher education exists in a state of continuous transformation, and although that change may, at times, move with glacial haste, its survival depends on responsive programmatic change and how academic leaders respond to myriad and unanticipated challenges that have immediate and consequential impacts on faculty (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; de los Reyes et al., 2022; Greer & Shuck, 2020). To support faculty in their ability to function personally and professionally during unexpected trauma necessitates a concerted effort towards ideating solutions that build their resilience in the face of catastrophic events, such as mass shootings, major hurricanes, tornados, and pandemics. Resiliency is a vital component in the ability to navigate complex, constant changes and adversity. Understanding what makes the faculty and institutions resilient is increasingly vital as higher education navigates complex, constant changes and adversity (Clemons, 2024; de los Reyes et al., 2022; K. W. Luthans et al., 2019). While modest attention has been paid to academic resilience as a student resource, faculty resilience has been largely unrepresented and undervalued in the research literature (Clemons, 2024; de los Reyes et al., 2022). What has emerged in recent studies indicates resilience helps individuals overcome adversity, serves as a resource for coping with complex situations, and enhances strengths in the pursuit of long-term academic performance (K. W. Luthans et al., 2019).

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For this study, resilience is defined as “the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances” (Masten, 2014, p. 10) and involves “the dynamic process and interaction between an academic and their everchanging environment that uses available internal and external resources” (de los Reyes et al., 2022, p. 51). Resilience is a ductile attribute that can be developed and encouraged as a method of strategic preparation or adaptation when faced with adversity. In addition, this study explores the concept of resilience as a flexible quality and adopts the idea that resilience can be learned, developed, and supported. For this study, trauma is defined as a personal response following an event that psychologically overwhelms one, often resulting in shock, denial, and changes in the body, mind, and behavior (Bonanno, 2004; Masten & Cicchetti, 2016). Additionally, for this study and at the institution studied, a faculty supervisor is defined as a faculty member serving as a department chair, department head, or school director and serves as an academic mentor responsible for overseeing and guiding faculty members’ research, teaching, and service activities within a specific department or discipline.

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore and understand faculty's lived experiences with two traumatic events, COVID-19 and Hurricane Ian, at a public university in Southwest Florida, and their resilience through those events. While the central questions that anchored the study were intended to better understand the faculty mindset over the course of two successive traumatic experiences, an unexpected outcome was the vital role of the supervisor in that mindset. The questions posed were: (1) What were faculty’s lived experiences with COVID-19 and Hurricane Ian, and how did their experiences impact their resilience and resilience development? (2) How did faculty members describe their ability to be resilient through traumatic events like COVID-19 and natural disasters? (3) How do environmental resources and support influence faculty resilience during successive traumatic events? While studies exist about the effects of COVID-19 or natural disasters on higher education, few focus on faculty’s lived experience, and none of them explore the impact of their department supervisor on their resilience through recurring traumatic events. Understanding faculty resilience and the relationship between the development of resilience and traumatic events is critical to better prepare for supporting faculty through times of adversity.

Between 2020 and 2022, the Southwest Florida region experienced the global COVID-19 pandemic and the fifth most powerful hurricane in U.S. history, Hurricane Ian. During COVID-19, faculty promptly transformed curricular instruction from face-to-face to virtual formats, but while responding to government mandates effectively, many suffered illness and loss due to the pandemic (Neuwirth et al., 2021). Faculty describe uncertainty regarding the long-term impact of the pandemic with feelings of anxiety, exhaustion, frustration, depression, and resentment (Watermeyer, Crick, et al., 2021; Watermeyer, Shankar, et al., 2021). Then, shortly after returning to in-person instruction and the “new normal,” many suffered personal loss and property devastation because of Hurricane Ian (Clemons, 2024). Faculty had little time to assess the long-term impacts of COVID-19 before they were challenged to navigate the impact of Hurricane Ian. As faculty members balanced the dual responsibilities of their personal and professional lives, post-hurricane, disaster-affected educators survived and continued to survive alongside their students (Chansky, 2019; Felix et al., 2013; Guth et al., 2021).

Understanding faculty resilience and the relationship between the development of resilience and traumatic events is critical to better prepare for supporting faculty through times of adversity. While exploring the primary research questions intended to understand the faculty mindset better, valuable insights were gained that contribute to a broader understanding of the topic, offer important context, and may inform future research directions. Implications and recommendations help inform higher education leaders and policymakers of the effects of reoccurring trauma on faculty and give leaders a better understanding of academic resilience and resilience development.

Literature Review

The environment of the academic workplace today involves dynamic processes and constraints that govern expectations and performance, which creates the unique work expectations of the professoriate; therefore, resilience is among the more pivotal factors essential for success in academia (Chakradhar et al., 2018; Clemons, 2024; de los Reyes et al., 2022). In this context, resilience transcends the mere survival of challenges; it embodies an adaptive response to adversity, restoring functionality and fostering growth in its aftermath. Ensuring success requires policies and leadership that assist resilience (Athota & Malik, 2019), and with supportive leadership, employee resilience could be an imperative strategic resource (Malik & Garg, 2020; Näswall et al., 2019). The relationship between the employee and the immediate supervisor has a significant effect (Holt et al., 2003), and supervisors can promote resilience by developing supportive relationships that build community within their departments (Caniëls & Hatak, 2022). Thus, positive organizational scholarship is crucial as it emphasizes human capacities as essential for thriving and advocates for a shift in higher education leadership toward life-affirming qualities that align with the growing focus on well-being (Cherkowski et al., 2021).

Looking at resilience development and how direct supervisors, such as department chairs, can support the faculty and foster resilience in higher education is imperative. Direct supervisors can positively or negatively influence the capacity to be resilient (Gu & Day, 2007) and are essential to mitigating any adverse effects of considerable stress and adversity (Brooks et al., 2022). Although literature specific to higher education is limited, insights from the fields of human resources, management, psychology, and leadership literature illuminate the need for further investigation within the higher education domain. This analysis will critically examine resilience in the context of dual crises, the development of employee resilience, the critical role of supervisory influence, and the essential practice of cultivating a sense of community within academic institutions.

Resilience in the Face of Dual Crises

In Southwest Florida, academics faced a dual onslaught of tumultuous challenges during the years 2020–2022, including the rapid transition to online instruction prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, swiftly followed by the devastation wrought by Hurricane Ian. The inception of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in the early months of 2020 sparked a global health emergency, prompting rapid responses from academic institutions transitioning within days to online instruction, grappling with the challenges of remote learning while contending with heightened anxiety and exhaustion among faculty, staff, and students (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2022; Neuwirth et al., 2021; Watermeyer, Crick, et al., 2021). Faculty were exhausted, overworked, and stressed as the coronavirus pandemic relentlessly wore on (Minello, 2020) while they acted as frontline providers of higher education (Watermeyer, Crick, et al., 2021). Reverberations in the academic community are substantial, and the societal repercussions of COVID-19 are immeasurable (Watermeyer, Crick, et al., 2021). As faculty worked to adapt to this new educational landscape, the onset of Hurricane Ian in September 2022 delivered another significant setback.

Hurricane Ian ravaged Florida's southwestern coast and left a trail of destruction, claiming lives and displacing thousands. The region suffered 152 confirmed deaths in 19 counties, more than 2.6 million without power, and an estimated 35,000 homes destroyed or severely damaged (Acosta, 2023; NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information 2022; "U.S. Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters", 2023). Faculty returned to campus just two weeks after the hurricane, and the effects were disparate among individuals, exhibiting varying degrees of impact (Clemons, 2024). Several faculty members returned despite

substantial personal losses, grappling with homelessness amidst the aftermath. After suffering through the devastation of a hurricane, faculty balanced survivorship and professorship (Felix et al., 2013), struggling with the same challenges their students face and having the difficult task of representing a vital pillar of support while concurrently struggling to get their own needs met (Guth et al., 2021). Through the dual crises, academia in Southwest Florida endeavored to resume normal operations. Despite personal losses and overwhelming stress, faculty persisted, balancing their own recovery with the demands of their profession throughout these events.

Developing Employee Resilience

Employee resilience is a vital strategic resource contributing to the organization's ability to adapt to adversity (Malik & Garg, 2020; Näswall et al., 2019; Nyaupane et al., 2021). When faced with repeated adversity, faculty describe creating community through an ethic of care and finding resilience through purpose (Clemons, 2024), indicating the importance of the interaction between an academic and their everchanging environment in response to challenges (de los Reyes et al., 2022). While understanding the internal motivators of faculty resilience is essential, institutions must consider the external contextual and organizational factors and benefits of building resilience (de los Reyes et al., 2022). Reframing resilience creates important openings for higher education transformation and avoids focusing unquestioningly on resilience as an individual responsibility. Past research has described resilience as a trait occurring as a rebound to adversity; however, the current resilience perspective identifies resilience as a trait that can be manifested in both stable and adverse conditions (Kuntz et al., 2016). To ensure proactive resilience development, one must consider employee resilience in non-crisis situations (Kuntz et al., 2016) before the calamity. By conceptualizing employee resilience solely under the view of response to adversity, the organization may be bound to a posttraumatic growth perspective, which detracts from the consideration that resilience can be developed (Kuntz et al., 2016).

While early studies on resilience highlighted the importance of individual resilience, contemporary studies indicate that resilience is essential to both the employee and the organization (Athota & Malik, 2019; Kuntz et al., 2016, 2017; Nyaupane et al., 2021; van Breda, 2016). Malik and Garg (2020) studied 300 professionals in India and identified a notable correlation between employee resilience and work engagement, suggesting that organizations nurturing employee resilience could substantially contribute to cultivating a highly engaged workforce. While introducing a new quantitative survey measure of employee resilience, the Employee Resilience Scale, the researchers conducted three studies in New Zealand with financial and tertiary education institutions. Näswall et al. (2019) discovered that employee resilience was a strong predictor of elevated levels of well-regarded employee attitudes, such as job satisfaction, affective commitment, and job engagement, while concurrently reducing lower levels of behavioral intentions linked to withdrawal behaviors, such as turnover intention (p. 363).

In a four-year, large-scale, mixed-methods research project involving 300 teachers in primary and secondary schools in England, Gu and Day (2007) examined the role of resilience in teacher effectiveness. The study found that resilience is determined by the interaction between the internal assets of the individual and the external environments in which the individual lives and grows (Gu & Day, 2007). Näswall et al. (2019) argued that employee resilience and the behaviors associated with this capability result from the interplay of individual and environmental factors and that it can be developed in environments that foster adaptive capacity (p. 355). Kuntz et al. (2017) highlight contemporary scholarly discourse that acknowledges the interdependence of employee and organizational resilience, which is vital for navigating and excelling in progressively demanding environments.

These dynamics demonstrate the interdependent relationship between employee and

organizational resilience, emphasizing the crucial role of supportive leadership in providing resources and guidance to address workplace challenges while fostering individual and organizational growth (Caniëls & Hatak, 2022; Kuntz et al., 2016, 2017). The overarching objective is cultivating a supportive environment for employees to develop and sustain resilience, thereby contributing to improved organizational performance and adaptability (Kuntz et al., 2017). It is imperative for institutions to recognize resilience as a pivotal skill among faculty and staff to enhance institutional effectiveness and seek to cultivate leadership that supports its development.

Supervisors' Role in Resilience

Supervisors can strengthen employees' resilience by developing and nurturing relations (Caniëls & Hatak, 2022). Employees have the capacity for ongoing development with the availability of resources that devise strategies for supporting the development of employee resilience (Kuntz et al., 2016, 2017; Näswall et al., 2019). Supervisor support cannot be underestimated as a critical resource and is crucial in stressful situations (Brooks et al., 2022; Gu & Day, 2007).

There is a burgeoning interest in examining the role of leadership attributes in cultivating resilience in a myriad of industries, yet this exploration remains largely absent within higher education. Caniëls and Hatak (2022) surveyed 123 employees in a study of employees of a Dutch defense organization, to evaluate the impact of leadership approach on employee resilience and indicated that leaders can enhance employee resilience by cultivating mutual, trust-driven, long-lasting connections with their followers, aiding them in adeptly navigating workplace transitions and setbacks. These findings are further supported by Plimmer et al. (2022), with a survey of 14,125 public sector employees in New Zealand, revealing that employee resilience correlates with supervisors' constructive leadership and an environment conducive to innovation.

The capacity to be resilient in adversity can be enhanced or inhibited by the nature of the settings in which we work and the people with whom we work (Gu & Day, 2007, p. 1305). An ineffective supervisor would erode resilience during a crisis; however, strong support would result in sustaining resilience; therefore, support is crucial in this respect (Brooks et al., 2022; Gu & Day, 2007). Effective skills for supervisors are essential to resilience and require specialized training to build knowledge and skills around supporting employees in times of crisis (Brooks et al., 2022). To cultivate faculty resilience, the supervisor must consistently foster a supportive environment (Clemons, 2024; Kuntz et al., 2017; F. Luthans et al., 2006). Achieving this involves fostering a sense of unity within the scholarly community and facilitating collective navigation of challenges, a process that strengthens individual resilience and fosters collaboration. This perspective implies shared responsibility for resilience building and suggests that organizations can support employee resilience by crafting a resilience-promoting environment (Kuntz et al., 2016, 2017; Richard, 2020). As supervisors play a crucial role in nurturing employee resilience through supportive leadership, it is essential to understand the significant impact of fostering a sense of community on promoting resilience within individuals and organizations.

Building Sense of Community

Social connection through a sense of community can help inform effective disaster-risk reduction initiatives and recovery processes and foster resilience among those affected by adversity (Gilmer et al., 2021; Guth et al., 2021; Marlowe, 2015; Norris & Kaniasty, 1996). McMillan and Chavis (1986) define a sense of community as a feeling that members have of

belonging, that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared belief that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together (p. 9). Achieving and maintaining supervisor support, a sense of preparedness, and a strong sense of community contribute to well-being after a disaster (Guth et al., 2021). Leveraging a sense of community as an intervention can contribute to mollifying the impacts of difficult situations and the distress created by disruptive events (Mannarini et al., 2022).

Social support initiatives can strengthen the sense of community and have important implications for future efforts to build stronger communities (Mannarini et al., 2022). Mannarini et al. (2022) examined the relationships between a sense of community, community resilience, and psychological well-being in a diverse sample of adults from various countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings indicated that a strong sense of community helped alleviate the effects of COVID-19 and was positively associated with well-being (Mannarini et al., 2022). In a study exploring the sense of community among international students in China amidst the direct threat of a global health crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic, Zhang et al. (2023) reaffirmed previous research, indicating that a strong sense of community was crucial for both community and individual resilience during times of crisis.

Leadership and social support are paramount in fostering resilience among faculty, particularly in creating a sense of community, which is critical in helping individuals navigate crises (Brooks et al., 2022; Caniëls & Hatak, 2022; Mannarini et al., 2022; Plimmer et al., 2022). (Brooks et al., 2022) emphasize that supervisor support significantly influences outcomes, with social support being a crucial element that cannot be undervalued. This sense of community plays a protective role, helping to mitigate the adverse effects of challenging situations, as those who maintained or established a sense of community during the pandemic-induced isolation experienced better mental health outcomes (Mannarini et al., 2022). Furthermore, supervisors who cultivate trust-based, long-term relationships with employees can enhance their resilience, which in turn promotes creativity and innovation within the organization (Caniëls & Hatak, 2022). The relationship between leadership and employee resilience is evident, as resilience is closely tied to the essential skills for thriving in challenging environments (Plimmer et al., 2022).

In the turbulent and continuously changing environment, resilience is a resource for overcoming adversity, allowing the organization to thrive (Athota & Malik, 2019; Nandy et al., 2021; Nyaupane et al., 2021; van Breda, 2016). Change is a constant in higher education, and the landscape is evolving rapidly (Nandy et al., 2021), making resilience critical for success in higher education (Chakradhar et al., 2018; Clemons, 2024). Resilience helps individuals in academia adjust to the varying demands and navigate multiple paths toward overcoming dramatic setbacks to pursue academic performance (K. W. Luthans et al., 2019). Employee resilience is essential to obtain organizational resilience (Athota & Malik, 2019; Kuntz et al., 2017; Nyaupane et al., 2021; van Breda, 2016), and although it is impossible to predict the future and avoid adversity, fostering employee resilience creates a strategic resource to deter internal lapses following adversity (F. Luthans et al., 2006; Malik & Garg, 2020). These findings collectively underscore the importance of supervisors in building a sense of community that not only supports resilience but also drives organizational success during crises.

Methodology, Data Collection, and Analysis

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and understand faculty's lived experiences with two traumatic events, COVID-19 and Hurricane Ian, and their resilience through those events. There is a symbiotic relationship between phenomenology and investigating faculty members' lived experiences. Consequently, upon review of qualitative methodologies, it became evident that exploring faculty resilience would be most effectively achieved through an interpretive approach utilizing phenomenological methodology.

Phenomenology aids in understanding the meaning people have constructed and how they make sense of their world experiences (Merriam, 2004; van Manen, 1990); therefore, the conceptual framework for this study consists of a constructivist worldview, which is essential to understanding faculty members' perceptions of their resilience. Resilience theory is founded in the study of adversity, and the description of resiliency begins when someone has adapted to a situation in life, arguing that it is not the nature of adversity that is most important but how we deal with it (Kuntz et al., 2016; Masten, 2014; Richardson, 2002; van Breda, 2016). By employing a constructivist interpretive framework, multiple realities that may exist in faculty perceptions of their resilience and how they experienced these two traumatic experiences can be understood. Thus, effectively analyzing the participants' experiences and the meanings they derive from their unique realities.

As a higher education employee, I acknowledge the potential biases inherent in my role, which I strive to address conscientiously as a researcher. As a researcher, Moustakas (1994) advocates diligently setting aside preconceptions (p. 22). Therefore, I adopt the practice of bracketing, wherein I momentarily set aside my personal biases to approach the subject of study with objectivity, enabling a fresh and unbiased examination of the phenomenon, thereby mitigating the adverse effects of bias.

Participants and Data Collection

The study used a purposive criterion sampling design in which faculty at a four-year public university in Southwest Florida were asked to participate in a semi-structured interview. Criterion sampling was appropriate for the study as all participants experienced both phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participant inclusion criteria included full-time instructional faculty employed at least one year before the onset of the global pandemic, COVID-19, and who have worked at the institution between 2019 and 2022 through COVID-19 and Hurricane Ian. For the purpose of this study, instructional faculty includes the ranks of Instructor I, II, and III, as well as Assistant, Associate, and Full Professor. Participants were recruited via email, which explained the parameters of the interviews and the purpose of the study. The final participants represented four of the seven academic colleges and several ranks and were scheduled for one individual interview that was one hour in length. The sample size met the established criteria and provided ample data for saturation. Prior to the study, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained (Protocol #S2023). The protocol of 10 questions guided the interviews and encouraged participants to elaborate on their responses, allowing a deeper understanding of participants' experiences. Participants were provided a copy of the transcript for review and the opportunity to member check and suggest revisions or redactions. Importantly, participants' identities were not linked to the transcripts, and each person was assigned a pseudonym. The participants in this study represented four of the seven academic colleges and schools and several ranks, including five full professors, one associate professor, and one instructor III. The participants represented three females and four males aged 30 to 80. When factoring age and gender into the analysis, it is noteworthy that there was no discernible indication of either playing a role as significant in the findings.

Analysis

Constant comparative thematic analysis techniques, supported and embraced by Moustakas (1994) and Creswell and Poth (2016), were used to analyze the transcripts. During the iterative process of reading, memoing, and coding emergent ideas, recurring patterns, and themes emerged that signified saturation and answered the research questions. Constant comparative thematic analysis involves a cyclical process of coding and comparing data iteratively to identify emerging themes and patterns (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through this

method, I continuously refined my understanding of the data, gradually constructing a comprehensive interpretation of the phenomenon under review: What were faculty’s lived experiences with COVID-19 and Hurricane Ian? How did faculty members describe their ability to be resilient through traumatic events like COVID-19 and natural disasters? How do environmental resources and support influence faculty resilience during successive traumatic events?

Findings

Participants revealed they had not previously reflected on or identified the related nature of their experiences of the pandemic and hurricane; as participants relived these events, themes common to both traumatic events emerged. While the central questions that anchored the study were intended to better understand the faculty mindset throughout two successive traumatic experiences, the findings here focus on a significant aberrant external phenomenon: the vital role of the department chair in helping or hindering faculty resiliency. Participant responses unequivocally demonstrated supervisors' pivotal role in mitigating the impacts of difficult life situations by fostering a sense of community.

The faculty participants’ resilience during COVID-19 and Hurricane Ian was affected by the department chair's efforts—or non-efforts—to create a sense of community through connections within the department and between colleagues. Those who reported a positive impact on their ability to persist credit the actions of their department’s leader for helping to temper some of the stress they were under during these challenging times. In contrast, those who described a lack of connection with leadership and a lack of a sense of community felt disconnected from their colleagues, their department, and the institutions as a whole.

Throughout the interviews, participants described their motivation to persist regardless of personal loss. The findings reveal a range of experiences among the seven participants regarding departmental leadership and community building to enhance resilience. Two participants credited strong department leadership efforts with enhancing their resilience by fostering a strong sense of community, while another two, driven by a sense of duty as senior faculty in the absence of effective leadership, proactively assumed the role of community builders. One participant, lacking leadership support, remained isolated, while the final two expressed a markedly negative perception of community within their department even today, attributing this to the absence of leadership during critical events. The participants described a construction of meaning when they experienced a sense of community expressed through everyday practices or efforts by their department chair. In addition, they described the support they received from the department chair as being instrumental in creating an environment in which a sense of community was fostered or lacking throughout both events. The community and connections positively built during the pandemic would later provide support when faced with another adversity.

Helena, an associate professor in healthcare, shared how traumatizing and exhausting the COVID-19 pandemic was for her and other faculty. She discussed working in the clinic treating patients while working twenty or more hours each week to transition her classes to an online format. While working in the clinics, Helena was isolated for eight months, unable to be around her family or others for fear of spreading COVID-19. She noted that the sense of community her department chair built was particularly meaningful to her due to the struggle and isolation she experienced. Helena indicated that healthcare professionals often lack community, sometimes acting “nitpicky and backstabbing,” and credits the actions of her department chair for changing that during the pandemic in their unit.

Helena describes how her department chair “created a community where ... we’re in a race together” and credits her department chair with changing “the whole camaraderie of the department.” The department chair started putting the faculty into groups and partnering with

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them to brainstorm solutions for how they could continue meeting the clinical requirement needs of their students. Additionally, she discussed how the department chair would call faculty regularly to ask how they were doing and if they needed any help. Helena shared that the department chair created a sense of community where “nobody complained to have to work extra.” She referred to the support of her department as conducive to her resilience.

Helena mentions that her department chair was equally exceptional during the aftermath of Hurricane Ian, where she lost her home and all her belongings. She was the only faculty member in her department impacted significantly by the hurricane; however, she indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic was a “good stepping stone” to prepare her for dealing with the aftermath of Ian. Helena stated that her department chair “was phenomenal” and was instrumental in her recovery after Hurricane Ian due to the community built within the department. She shared that her department chair was flexible during each traumatic event and credited their flexibility as the “key to survival” as the team collaborated to cover classes for one another. Due to losing her home, Helena had to leave town to find a place to stay that would allow her to bring her dog. Her department chair allowed her to transition her classes to an online format until she could find a place to stay closer to campus. Additionally, Helena spoke of the sense of community in her department and how her colleagues reached out to offer support. Colleagues offered to take classes or provide assistance in any way they could. Helena stated that her colleagues were her “pillars” and hoped other departments were like hers because “that was the only thing” that kept her going.

Similarly, Conifer, a professor, described the sense of community built by his department chair “taking leadership” to recognize that “we have to nurture our community” and indicated these actions as essential to their resilience. He shared that his department chair organized virtual lunches for the department during COVID-19 to create community in a time of isolation. Conifer further shared that the department chair created virtual social time by eating meals and talking to each other, and he credited his department chair for doing a “wickedly smart thing” by creating informal social time together. The sense of community, built by coordinating social gatherings, helped the faculty to collaborate as a team to overcome the challenges they faced in the switch to remote teaching during the pandemic. Conifer described how the community built by the department chair fostered an environment in which faculty helped each other learn virtual meeting technology and said they “taught and trained each other.” He shared that he could put out a call: “Can anybody help me? And people would help.” It was apparent in the responses that Conifer and his department credited the sense of community for creating an environment where the department worked together to overcome adversity.

During Hurricane Ian, Conifer’s department continued to feel a sense of community. He shared that they immediately had a group chat message where they could share updates and later check to see how everyone was doing in the aftermath of the storm. Conifer said that his department shared the experience “together,” living moment by moment through their group chat and that the experience was “profound.” While he did not personally experience significant impacts like Helena, he recognized the disparate effects felt depending on where faculty members lived and offered his support to those impacted by the storm. The sense of community built within the department during the pandemic enhanced the faculty members’ resilience and continued to support them as they faced recurring trauma with the hurricane.

Philoden, a professor, described his experience as “building the parachute while falling” as his department lacked leadership during the pandemic and hurricane. With the lack of department leadership to foster a sense of community, Philoden, as a senior faculty member, felt compelled to step into this role, providing support and creating a sense of community for his colleagues. He defined resilience as “tapping into your support system” and emphasized his efforts to support his colleagues’ resilience by fostering a sense of community. Like Conifer, Philoden indicated a need to communicate more frequently by phone, text, or email during the

pandemic to trade ideas and potential solutions for challenges. He called it a “bonding experience” and stated it felt “that we’re in this together and we’re gonna do this.” The sense of community Philoden created during the pandemic would later aid his colleagues during the recovery from Hurricane Ian. While Hurricane Ian did not significantly impact his home, Philoden demonstrated care for his community when a colleague came to live with him after the storm. He said she had lost her home, so he offered her a place to stay with her two big dogs. Throughout the interview, Philoden demonstrated his sense of responsibility to serve as a community builder in the lack of presence of the unit’s leadership.

Arum, an instructor III, experienced the traumatic switch to remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, finding creative solutions to meet students’ needs. Like Helena, Arum worked to identify ways to continue clinical placement for students and described the innovative ways the team partnered to implement practices and technology during the pandemic to assist with meeting students’ needs. Arum described feeling a sense of community in the clinical team but did not mention interactions with leadership, as the college lacked department leadership during both events. She indicated that the college leadership, while flexible, was “kind of out of the picture pretty much for the whole pandemic situation.”

Like Philoden, Arum stepped up and fostered a sense of community within her team during the pandemic, driven by her responsibilities as a clinical coordinator and her commitment to student needs, a resilience that later supported her when she lost her home and belongings during Hurricane Ian. She described asking for help from her team after Hurricane Ian when she had a “flooded house and nowhere to live” and shared that people were helping her for weeks by bringing food and taking clothes to wash. Arum described what she called a “weird feeling” in the aftermath of the hurricane as she tried to ready herself to return to campus but “didn’t even own a toothbrush” and had to create a list of basic necessities to return to work. She defined resilience as the “ability to bend and ...mold into something better.” Arum continued to describe her resilience, indicating the increase in closeness with people as a good outcome, which indicates a sense of community built through her experience.

In contrast, three participants had vastly different experiences, indicating a strong disconnect between academic leadership and faculty. Spruce, a professor, shared that he often “just kinda figured it out” during the pandemic and had little interaction with colleagues and leaders. He mentioned that the communication consisted primarily of emails stating, “if you need anything, contact us.” However, he felt the challenges he was experiencing “were things that people couldn’t necessarily help with.” Throughout the interview, he shared his experiences through the pandemic and the hurricane and described his solitary approach. His isolated approach and disconnection from his department and unit were evident during the interview, indicating that his experiences during these traumatic events continue to affect his sense of community within the institution today. In addition, the participant did not identify growth personally or within his department occurring as a result of the adversity, indicating that his experience differed from those who responded that the resilient actions taken during one event would later aid them in recovery during the next.

Two additional faculty members working within the same academic unit describe a much more discouraging experience during the pandemic and the hurricane. Rose, a professor, described her experience during COVID-19 as a “loss of community” and further elaborated that “COVID has had an impact on any sense of community.” She shared that her colleagues were not engaged during the pandemic, and since that time, few have come to campus. Rose asked, “How do you create a community... when we aren’t in the same place at the same time?” Throughout the interview, there was no mention of attempts by department leaders to communicate or build a sense of community; instead, a distant environment created an opportunity for disengagement and disrespect. Argan, a professor, described a similar experience; he felt no support during the pandemic or hurricane. The professor shared that there was “zero caring” and that it was “painful,” stating that if he were the department leader, he

would “at least text them and call them,” asking, “Is everything okay? Do you need anything?” Rose and Argan described that the lack of community started during the pandemic and continues today.

As I compare their stories and experiences, it becomes clear that the efforts of the academic leaders, such as department chairs, to create a sense of community directly affected the participants’ resilience. The goal of this study was to identify factors that foster resilience. The testimonies shared by these participants speak to the importance of understanding faculty resilience and the relationship between their resilience and the leadership practices within the department, which is supported in the research literature.

Discussion

The ideation of this study was inspired by a desire to understand the factors that motivate faculty to recover and persist after experiencing repeated adversity and to find ways to foster that resilience. The participants experienced repeated adversity during COVID-19 and Hurricane Ian and, in two years, regardless of personal impact, faculty members continue to push forward. In this article, I posit that it is crucial to understand faculty resiliency amid adversity and offer valuable insights into the necessity of developing new strategies to bolster faculty support, emphasizing the pivotal role of the department chair in fostering a sense of community within their department. The findings revealed themes underscoring the pivotal role of department chairs in fostering faculty resilience through community building during successive traumatic events. These findings align with prior research, highlighting the importance of leadership in creating supportive environments that contribute to faculty’s capacity to adapt and thrive under adversity (Kuntz et al., 2017; Näswall et al., 2019).

Consistently through the study, the participants defined resilience, indicating that resilience involves the identification of motivational forces that foster the activation and utilization of resilience and demonstrate how they were resilient throughout COVID-19 and Hurricane Ian. Their lived experiences throughout these events support Masten’s (2014) definition of resilience as they each describe how they adapted successfully to disturbances. A consistent theme throughout was the effect that the actions of academic leaders, department chairs, and department heads had on their sense of community and, thus, their resilience. The findings highlight how faculty resilience is not solely an individual trait but is deeply influenced by the organizational and relational context shaped by departmental leadership.

The participant's responses clearly showed that the department chair's support cannot be underestimated as a critical resource and is crucial in stressful situations (Brooks et al., 2022; Gu & Day, 2007). Caniëls and Hatak (2022) indicated that supervisors can strengthen employees’ resilience by developing and nurturing relations, which was evident in the participants’ responses. Additionally, the efforts of department chairs described by participants to build trust-based, collaborative environments are congruent with Caniëls and Hatak’s (2019) assertion that relationship-focused leadership enhances resilience by empowering employees to leverage social and organizational networks. The observed link between a strong sense of community and enhanced resilience corroborates Mannarini et al.’s (2022) findings, suggesting that fostering connectedness can mitigate the negative impacts of adversity. This aligns with Guth et al. (2021), who emphasized community support as essential for navigating disaster recovery in educational settings. The ability of department chairs to foster community through intentional practices such as facilitating collaboration, offering emotional and practical support, and maintaining open lines of communication emerged as a critical factor in mitigating the effects of traumatic events, further supporting Gu and Day (2007) assertion that resilience in professional settings is a dynamic process that evolves through interactions between individuals and their environments.

The participants who shared the opposite experience reported a frayed connection to their department and colleagues throughout these traumatic experiences, further supporting the literature. Participants who reported a lack of support and connection with their department chair during these traumatic events described feeling isolated and disconnected from their colleagues and the broader institution. This aligns with the research of Guth et al. (2021), suggesting that inadequate leadership and the absence of a sense of community can exacerbate feelings of stress and hinder resilience. The participants indicated that the frayed connections diminished their ability to navigate challenges effectively and undermined their long-term engagement and trust in their departments. This perspective corroborates findings by Mannarini et al. (2022), highlighting the protective role of the community in mitigating crisis impacts and suggesting that its absence can leave individuals vulnerable to more significant psychological and occupational challenges. These results reinforce the critical need for higher education institutions to prioritize leadership development and community building as strategic interventions to enhance resilience, recognizing that effective leadership fosters resilience and recovery while its absence risks deepening institutional divisions during crises.

The findings offer an insightful perspective on how faculty members navigated COVID-19 and Hurricane Ian and how efforts fostered resilience, emphasizing the department chairs' role in supporting and guiding their faculty through adversity. The purpose of reporting these themes is to stimulate inquiry and communicate what I have learned about faculty resilience and resilience development through traumatic events like COVID-19 and Hurricane Ian. By understanding the lived experiences of the faculty, insight may be gained into their needs and used to develop further leadership training for department chairs. Creating and fostering an environment of resilience will provide an opportunity for better faculty retention and career progression while creating a culture of innovation and success for the institution. Resilience is a vital strategic resource contributing to the organization's ability to adapt to change (Malik & Garg, 2020; Nyaupane et al., 2021). The world is dynamic and everchanging; therefore, it is imperative for organizations to develop the ability to cope with continuous changes and withstand or absorb disturbances (Finewood & Henderson, 2019; Nyaupane et al., 2021). With the lack of literature on resilience in higher education, researchers must begin to explore the topic not only as an individual trait one person either does or does not have but also as a strategic resource that can be developed.

Conclusion

It is imperative for institutions to implement comprehensive resilience-building initiatives that encompass leadership development, support systems, and community-building strategies so they may adapt to the recurring adversity common in today's higher education environment. This study's findings underscore the critical role of department chairs in fostering faculty resilience, particularly in the face of traumatic events like COVID-19 and Hurricane Ian. Deferring these initiatives binds the institution to posttraumatic growth and potentially compromises its capacity to effectively support its faculty and maintain operational stability in the face of future adversities. By creating a sense of community, department chairs can significantly mitigate the impacts of trauma and adversity, promoting a supportive environment that enhances faculty well-being and furthers institutional resilience. This study recognizes the need for more research and paves the way for future studies on faculty resilience through adversity, trauma, and even significant organizational change, which could include a more expansive review of additional academic leadership roles. Future research should encompass a more extensive and diverse sample of faculty members across various institutions and evaluate the effectiveness of programs to enhance resilience, particularly focusing on the pivotal role of department chairs in this process. The findings of this research could potentially shape the way we evaluate and strengthen resilience among faculty, particularly in relation to the crucial role

of the department chair. This research illuminates the necessity for higher education institutions to invest in leadership development programs that provide department chairs with the skills to build resilient academic communities. Improving department chair effectiveness through targeted training and support can ensure that institutions are better equipped to navigate future adversities, leading to a sense of community among faculty and developing faculty resilience. Academic leaders must actively seek to integrate resilience-promoting practices within their leadership frameworks to foster a resilient academic workforce capable of thriving amidst ongoing and future challenges in higher education.

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